

Transnational Spaces in the Virtual World: Dominican Migrant Communities in the Social Media

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>This thesis explores transnational migrant spaces in the social media. Transnational migrants are an important resource to the development of the country of origin, especially those in the developing world. Migrants with a feeling of belonging to the country of origin and a cultural identity connected to it transfer economic, political, social and cultural benefits there. Social media has added a new medium to create and recreate feelings of belonging and cultural identity in virtual migrant communities. The aim of this study is to examine these virtual migrant communities: to see how migrants construct their cultural identities, maintain relationships and create networks as a part of such a community.</p> <p>The study focuses on five Dominican migrant sites in Facebook and examines the economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of transnationalism present on the sites and looks at the specific aspects of virtual communality. The discussions on the sites were followed throughout the year 2010. A content analysis with a theory-guided approach is employed so that the data was the starting point and theory was used as an instrument of analysis.</p> <p>The analysis revealed that political and cultural topics received most attention on the sites examined. Politics of both Dominican Republic and the US were critically discussed. Although a driving force behind migration, economic topics received less attention. Shared experiences and sharing everyday life events was an important part of the discussions and of social transnational practices creating the feeling of a community. Some sites themselves proved to be examples of social transnational practices. Dominican identity appeared in many ways in the discussions. The dominant discourse on these sites was the pride of being a Dominican. As elsewhere in the surrounding society of the migrants the categories for self-identification are often imposed upon Dominicans, here they could and did define their own Dominican identity with the identity markers they saw as relevant. This identity was structured around language, historical, ethnic and racial identity markers that form the core of the Dominican identity. Particularly interesting was the discussion regarding ethnicity and race as a concept and the racial categorizations in the US differ from those of the Dominican Republic. The identity and community were further reproduced in cultural practices, especially in discussions concerning food, music, dance and literature. It was also reflected in social practices in shared experiences that are typical to specifically Dominicans. The communities contained features typical for both migrant communities as well as for virtual communities.</p> <p>The study concludes that social media offers an avenue for various practices useful in the migration-development nexus. It can be used in intra-diaspora communication, as the groups examined did to provide sociability, support, information, sense of belonging and identity. It can be used to include second- and third generation migrants in transnational communities. Diaspora-home communication between the country of origin government or communities and the migrants at an individual or migrant community level has not yet reached its full potential. Social media's role could be, for example, in improving openness and transparency of government in the country-of origin as well as informing of services offered in migrants' destination communities. This new media is not equally available to all but should be embraced wherever possible also in the migration and development contexts.</p>			
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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Tutkielma tarkastelee transnationalististen eli yllirajaisen siirtolaisten tiloja sosiaalisessa mediassa. Yllirajaiset siirtolaiset ovat tärkeä resurssi lähtömaan kehityksessä, erityisesti kehitysmaissa. Siirtolaiset, jotka tuntevat yhteenkuuluvuutta ja heijastavat lähtömaan kulttuuri-identiteettiä, siirtävät taloudellisia, poliittisia, sosiaalisia ja kulttuurisia resursseja lähtömaahansa. Sosiaalinen media tarjoaa uuden kanavan luoda ja vahvistaa tätä yhteenkuuluvuuden tunnetta ja kulttuuri-identiteettiä siirtolaisten virtuaaliyhteisöissä. Tutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella näitä virtuaaliryhmiä ja selvittää miten siirtolaiset rakentavat kulttuuri-identiteettiään, luovat ja ylläpitävät suhteita ja muodostavat verkostoja virtuaaliryhmän jäsenenä.</p> <p>Tutkielma keskittyy viiteen Dominikaanisiirtolaisten Facebook-ryhmään ja tarkastelee ryhmien keskusteluissa ilmeneviä yllirajaisuuden taloudellisia, poliittisia, sosiaalisia ja kulttuurisia ulottuvuuksia sekä virtuaaliryhmien erityispiirteitä. Analyysi keskittyy ryhmässä vuonna 2010 käytyihin keskusteluihin. Tutkimusmenetelmänä on käytetty teoriaohjautuvaa sisältöanalyysiä. Tutkimus on ollut materiaali- ja teoria- ja toimintatutkimuksen välineenä.</p> <p>Analyysi osoitti, että poliittiset ja kulttuuriset aiheet herättivät eniten kiinnostusta tutkituissa ryhmässä. Sekä Dominikaanisen tasavallan että Yhdysvaltojen politiikasta keskusteltiin kriittisesti. Vaikkakin taloudelliset tekijät ovat usein siirtolaisuuden taustalla, sosiaalisen median virtuaaliyhteisöissä ne saivat verrattain vähän huomiota. Yhteiset kokemukset ja arkipäivän tapahtumien jakaminen oli tärkeä osa keskusteluita ja osaltaan sosiaalisia yllirajaisia tapoja yhteisöllisyyden tunteen luomiseen ja ylläpitämiseen. Dominikaaninen identiteetti oli läsnä useissa keskusteluissa. Vallitseva diskurssi ryhmässä oli kansallissylpeys. Ympäröivä yhteiskunta Yhdysvalloissa ei useinkaan arvosta Dominikaaneja ja pakottaa heidät määrittelemään identiteettinsä sellaisten luokittelujen kautta, jotka eivät Dominikaanien omiin käsityksiin Dominikaanisudesta. Virtuaaliyhteisöissä jäsenet saattoivat itse määritellä oman identiteettinsä niistä lähtökohdista, jotka he kokivat oikeiksi. Identiteetti muotoutui näin kielen, historian, etnisten ja rodullisten ilmausten ympärille. Erityisen kiinnostavaa oli nähdä miten etnisyyden ja rodun käsitteet ja luokittelut poikkeavat toisistaan Dominikaanisessa tasavallassa ja Yhdysvalloissa. Identiteettiä ja yhteisöllisyyttä toistettiin kulttuuristen keskusteluiden, erityisesti liittyen ruokaan, musiikkiin, tanssiin ja kirjallisuuteen. Se heijastui myös yhteisissä ja tyypillisesti Dominikaanisissa sosiaalisissa käytännöissä ja niiden muistelemisessa. Tutkituissa ryhmässä oli sekä siirtolais- että virtuaaliyhteisöille tyypillisiä piirteitä.</p> <p>Tutkielmassa todetaan, että sosiaalinen media uuden tarjoaa väylän siirtolaisuus-kehitys yhteyden ylläpitämiseksi ja vahvistamiseksi. Sitä voidaan käyttää siirtolaisten keskinäisessä kommunikaatiossa tuottamaan yhteisöllisyyttä, tukea, tietoa, yhteenkuuluvuutta ja identiteettiä, kuten tutkituissa ryhmässä tehtiin. Sitä voidaan käyttää liittämään toisen ja kolmannen sukupolven siirtolaisia yllirajaisiin yhteisöihin. Lähtömaan viranomaisien ja yhteisöjen ja siirtolaisten välinen kommunikaatio ei ole useinkaan kovin kehittynyttä. Sosiaalisen median kautta voisi pyrkiä parantamaan avoimuutta ja läpinäkyvyyttä lähtömaan hallinnossa sekä tiedottaa siirtolaisia palveluista, joita valtio tarjoaa siirtolaisilleen kohdemaissa. Sosiaalinen media ei ole kaikkien saavutettavissa, mutta sitä tulisi hyödyntää, mikäli mahdollista, myös siirtolaisuus ja kehityskontesteissa aiempaa tehokkaammin.</p>		
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Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	3
1.1	Research questions	5
1.2	Definitions	7
2	Migration from the Dominican Republic.....	10
2.1	Migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States	11
2.1.1	Undocumented Migration from the Dominican Republic	13
2.2	Motives for departure.....	14
2.3	Dominicans in the United States	15
2.4	Effects of migration on the Dominican Republic.....	17
2.4.1	Economic effects	18
2.4.2	Political effects	19
2.4.3	Socio-cultural effects	20
3	Theoretical framework and methodology	23
3.1	Transnationalism and transnational migration	23
3.1.1	Premises of transnationalism related to my study	23
3.1.2	Transnational migration and migrant transnationalism.....	25
3.1.3	Critique against transnational migration theories	28
3.2	Identity construction, national and migrant identity	30
3.2.1	Cultural identity and migrant identities.....	30
3.2.2	Identity in online situations	31
3.3	Concept of community and migrant communities	32
3.3.1	Migrant communities	33
3.4	Virtual communities.....	34
3.4.1	Boundaries	35
3.4.2	Social order and control.....	36
3.4.3	The role of virtual communities	36
3.4.4	Prior research on ethnic virtual communities.....	37
3.4.5	Social network sites and the Facebook	38
3.5	Methodology and research data	42
3.6	Research on the internet, research ethics and my role as a researcher	43
3.6.1	Research ethics.....	44
4	Dominican migrants' virtual communities	47
4.1	Introduction of the forums examined	47

4.2	Data selection process	49
4.3	Participants.....	50
4.4	Economic practices	55
4.4.1	Remittances and philanthropy	55
4.4.2	Transnational enterprises	56
4.4.3	Diasporic tourism.....	57
4.4.4	Home country investments.....	58
4.4.5	Economic nostalgia and cultural-economic linkages.....	59
4.4.6	Transnational labour market.....	60
4.5	Political practices	62
4.5.1	Dominican politics	63
4.5.2	US politics	73
4.5.3	Civic activism	80
4.6	Social practices	83
4.6.1	Shared experiences.....	87
4.7	Cultural practices	90
4.7.1	Music, dance, film, theatre, folklore, food and literature	90
4.7.2	Language, race and ethnicity as identity markers.....	95
4.8	Practices and characteristics typical for a virtual community	109
4.8.1	Establishing boundaries	113
4.8.2	Social order and control.....	114
5	Summing up and conclusions	116
5.1	What kinds of topics are discussed at the different sites?	116
5.1.1	What topics create a lot of discussion?	116
5.1.2	Are the issues discussed about the Dominican Republic and the current home different?	116
5.2	Do the discussions reflect the transnational identity construction?	117
5.2.1	How does 'Dominicanness' appear in the discussions?	117
5.2.2	Are common characteristics for virtual communities apparent?	119
5.2.3	Are there any features common for migrant communities present and how do they function in the virtual context?	119
5.3	Concluding remarks	123
6	References	126

1. Introduction

Migration is a topical phenomenon occurring all around the globe at a constantly growing scale. Many developing countries are experiencing large-scale migration. There are cultural, economic, political and social implications of migration. In my bachelor's thesis (2005) I examined the economic effects to the national economy of the source country and argued for a multivariable model that takes into account also the lesser-researched effects that the increasing transnational migration creates. These include, in addition to the more familiar concepts of remittances and brain drain, also other employment effects, such as brain gain with return and circular migration, nostalgic exports and diasporic tourism, transnational enterprises, philanthropy and emigrants' investments. I found these various aspects to be significant in economic terms and growing in volume. However, I feel that a macro-level approach on economic orientation could not get deep enough in the migration phenomenon and the changes it is experiencing. In addition to statistics quoting estimates and theoretical models on migration, a better understanding of migrants' experiences is needed. This was noted among others by Dennis Conway & Robert Potter (2007, 30). They point out that focusing on people's everyday lives, family and community relationships gives a clearer picture of the migration phenomenon. Also Ninna Nyberg Sørensen (1998, 246) argues that it is necessary to listen to how migrants themselves interpret their situatedness and how they culturally construct 'histories' and 'herstories'. Only through such methods is it possible to understand how migration affects people's sense of belonging and identity. That is why I now try to gain a better understanding of transnational migration by interpreting online conversations of people involved in it. Examining migrants' experiences and the diasporic spaces they create in order to maintain contacts with both the old and new home can help us to understand how migrants themselves see the phenomenon and how they conceptualize themselves in the space between the two countries.

In this thesis, I plan to dig deeper into the lives of Dominicans affected by transnational migration. I will try to deduce how migrants construct their identities, maintain relationships and create networks as a part of a community or several communities. I

will focus on the relatively new phenomenon of virtual spaces in the form of social network sites and more specifically the platform called Facebook and will examine the discussions on several Dominican migrant Facebook groups. I will analyze the conversations on these pages and attempt to relate my findings to the ongoing debate on the manifestations and effects of transnational migration.

Why is transnational migration an important research topic for development studies? Transnational migrants can be very valuable for developing countries, not only as a source of capital in the form of remittances or investments, but also in terms of having political and social influence in and knowledge and understanding of several societies. As Bernal (2006, 176) puts it: Diasporas are important to developing nations as they bridge the local and global by operating in and across social fields, by inventing new forms of citizenship, community and political practices and in some ways, by changing the world. In the case of Dominican Republic, David Howard (2003a, 58) maintains that the connections between Dominicans on the island and those Stateside (in the United States) clearly form a crucial backbone to the Dominican society.

Online networks allow people to create a range of new social spaces in which they can meet and interact with each other (Kollock & Smith 1999, 3). According to Nancy Baym & Anette Markham (2009, x), the internet is involved in at least four major transformations of our time 1) media convergence, 2) mediated identities, 3) redefinitions of social boundaries and 4) transcendence of geographical boundaries. Especially involvement in the last three transformations makes it an interesting research topic in the context of transnational migration. Migration and new technologies have received a fair amount of interest in research; the effects of mobile phones, e-mail and the internet on migration and transnationalism have been studied in several countries and contexts. Bernal (2006, 164 & 175) notes that cyberspace and the internet is the quintessential diasporic medium, ideally suited for migrants in different locations to connect. She points out that looking at issues of identity, community and 'emotional citizenship' bring into focus elements that are often overlooked when the internet is seen merely as a tool for circulating information or as a site of rational discourse.

These issues – identity, community and ‘emotional citizenship’ - are what I intend to focus on within the social media. Social network sites such as Facebook are still a relatively recent phenomenon that has not produced much research at least in the context of social sciences or migration. Rajiv Srinivasan (2009, 168) notes that e-diaspora of migrants in online settings is a relevant research topic, that virtual worlds can have a significant role in forming identities. As Arturo Escobar (2000, 64) states, research on virtual communities is important, not only for understanding what these new ‘villages’ are but for enable us to imagine the kinds of communities we can create with the help of these emerging technologies.

My own background affects my choice of research topic. My interest in the Dominican Republic derives from the time I worked there. That time awakened an interest towards the country and its people that has continued as evidenced by the topic of my Bachelor’s thesis. The Dominican Republic offers an excellent opportunity to study my other interest, migration. My interest towards migration also stems from my past. I was born as a second-generation Finnish migrant in Sweden. From 1950’s to 1970’s ten percent of Finns migrated to Sweden, among them my family. Even though my family returned to Finland just after seven years, a feeling of close connection to Sweden has remained. I hold citizenship in both countries. My sister has settled permanently in Sweden and I lived there for a few years as an adult myself. Settling in Sweden seems a viable alternative and I feel at home in both countries. My own background awakened my interest in the experience of transnational living and identity, and I wanted to examine the phenomenon closer.

1.1 Research questions

I chose five Dominican migrant Facebook sites to examine. These are *Dominicans*, *Dominicans in New York*, *Donde Estan Los Dominicanos de Faceook* (sic!), *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* and *Dominicans in Philadelphia*. The sites vary in size (number of members), activity, mode of operation and several other aspects, yet they all turn in the first hand to Dominican migrants. Some groups are directed to migrants in a specific location, such as New York or Philadelphia while others try to capture

Dominican migrants all around the US or the world. There is even a group that seeks to combine these approaches by inviting members from Miami and elsewhere in the US.

I will be focusing on the issues of identity and community of transnational migrants in online situations. My primary research question is:

How are transnational identity and a sense of community manifested in the virtual migrant communities in social network sites?

I will try to answer my main question by looking at the conversations on the sites through the following sub-questions:

What kinds of topics are discussed at the different sites?

- What topics create a lot of discussion and/or are considered important?
- Are the issues discussed about the Dominican Republic and the current home community/communities different?

Do the discussions reflect the transnational identity construction and if so, how?

- How does 'Dominicanness' appear in the discussions

How is the sense of community created?

- Are common characteristics for virtual communities apparent?
- Are there any features common for migrant communities present and how do they function in the virtual context?

In the next chapter, I will look at Dominican migration. I will introduce the historical perspective of the phenomenon and examine its motives and consequences. I will study the scale, forms and directions of Dominican migration and look at the issue of il/legality.

In chapter three, I will discuss the theories and methods employed in my study. What is transnationalism and transnational migration? How are identities constructed? How are communities formed and maintained? What are virtual communities like and how do they differ from 'traditional' or 'real-world' communities? I will explain the methods used in my study and discuss the ethics of data collection online.

The fourth chapter contains the analysis of the data. It introduces the Dominican virtual communities studied and describes the material available on the sites. It is followed by the analysis of the data linking back to the theories and discussion on the findings.

The concluding chapter summarizes the study and links it to a wider discussion on the migration-development nexus. Finally the development potential of migrants in the social media is considered.

This chapter will end with a definitions section below. I have tried to gather key terms and how they are used in this study in one place for clarity and convenience of the reader.

1.2 Definitions

Community – A community in this study is understood as defined in Wellman 2001, 3 as *social networks that provide companionship, support, information and a sense of belonging*. The concept of community is discussed in more detail in section 3.3.

Diaspora – There are multiple definitions for diaspora that seek to delineate the phenomenon in differing terms. The term was traditionally used to describe mainly the Jewish communities outside Israel but is now increasingly being used to depict *situations of dwelling and travelling across national borders with multi-locale attachments and sense of displacement*. It has also become increasingly common for migrants to *sustain dispersed forms of community and identity*. (Adams Parham 2004, 199) José Luis Benítez (2006, 183) refers to diaspora as a metaphor and uses the term with emphasis on the transnational communications and social practices between migrants and their home community and country. As defined above, the Dominican community outside the home country can be viewed as a diaspora.

Discourse - The term has various definitions and it can be understood in several ways. In this study, the term is used as defined by the concepts of Michel Foucault and Stuart

Hall. Discourse is "*a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment.*" Discourse enables us to see the topic in a certain way at the same time excluding other ways of talking and reasoning about it. Discourse is an expression of power and a system that spreads power. Those that produce a discourse have the power to confirm its legitimacy as knowledge. Whether a discourse is true or untrue is not as important as whether it has practical implications. In other words, a discourse is a certain way to represent a phenomenon. (Foucault 1980, 201; Hall 1999, 98-105) Foucault's definition of discourse has been found problematic in relation to the internet, as the connection between power and discourse is not as self-evident in a context where horizontal flow of information is possible. Ananda Mitra maintains that the only power producing a preferred discourse and control are the members of the specific site. Yet, even there a power-play of sorts is ongoing as the preferred discourse is decided and forced through by the majority or the insiders of a group. (Mitra 2000, 691)

Identity - Identity is a socially constructed phenomenon that is constantly being reproduced within a discourse. It is suggested that identity in today's world is more and more fragmented, formed by a multitude of intersecting and often conflicting discourses. *Identities emerge out of translating 'me' into stories.* (Hall 1999, 250-251) Identity is discussed further in chapter 3.2.

Social field – Peggy Levitt & Ninne Nyberg Sørensen (2004, 3) argue that transnational approach to migration begins with the understanding that migrants are to be studied within transnational social fields. Thomas Soehl & Roger Waldinger (2010, 1490) describe transnational social fields as "a set of interlocking networks across national boundaries" and Peggy Levitt & Nina Glick Schiller (2004, 1003) describe them as multi-layered and multi-sited encompassing those who move and those who stay behind. They define social field as a "*set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed*" (ibid. 1009). Social fields allow us to move beyond the direct experience of migration into interaction where individuals that do not move

themselves maintain social relations across borders. Transnational social fields will be discussed in chapter 3.1.2.

Social network sites – The forum of my study, Facebook is a social network site. According to Dana Boyd & Nicole Ellison (2007) social network sites can be defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. What this technical definition involves in practice will be discussed in section 3.4.5.

Transnational migration - Transnational migration as a term emerges from current discourse on international population movement in the era of globalization where the people involved live between two worlds (Conway & Potter 2007, 26). Peggy Levitt (2001b, 199) suggests that transnationalism in the context of migration is not only that numerous individuals live their lives across borders but that a significant number from a given place of origin and settlement *share this experience collectively thus transforming the way they see themselves as a group*. Transnationalism and transnational migration are discussed in chapter 3.1.

Virtual community - A group of people that interact primarily through computer-mediated communication and identify with and have developed feelings of belonging and attachment to each other. The feelings are known as a ‘sense of community’. (Blanchard 2004, 55) The terms online community and virtual community will be used interchangeably. Virtual communities are the topic of chapter 3.4.

2 Migration from the Dominican Republic

Dominican Republic is a country in the Caribbean on the island of Hispaniola that it shares with Haiti. It has a population of approximately 10 million (Higman 2011, 276). The largest cities in the country are Santo Domingo and Santiago de los Caballeros. In the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), it ranks 88th out of 169 countries, making it a country with medium high HDI value, yet below the regional average in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNDP 2010). On average, Dominican adults have received a little less than seven years of schooling, while today the children can expect to receive around 12 years of schooling. However, the gross enrolment ratio to education is only 73.5% leaving a quarter of the population without education. The unemployment rate is 15.6% and the percentage of undernourished population is 21.6. Private consumption per capita is estimated at little less than 5,500\$, whereas in the primary migration destination country, the United States, the corresponding figure is over 29,000\$ (Ibid.). All this suggests that in a country, where migration has been for decades seen as a way to better life, expansive migration is likely to continue even in the future. Manuel Orozco (2008a, 3) found that 29% of the 1000 Dominicans he interviewed considered migrating within the following 12 months.

It is estimated that 1.6 million Dominicans, that is over ten percent of the population, live as migrants. Out of these, approximately 1.24¹ million live in the United States, 90 000 in Spain and 280 000 in all other countries combined. Even though the number of Dominicans in Spain has tripled during the past decade, the figure is still marginal compared to the number of Dominicans in the United States, which is why I in my study concentrate mainly on the Dominican diaspora in the US. (INE 2010, 4; 2001, 40; Orozco 2008a, 18)

¹ There is a lot of inconsistency in the number of Dominicans in the United States. This is due to the large-scale undocumented migration and a somewhat unreliable census system. As Douglas Massey and Chiara Capoferro (2007, 259-260) conclude, the U.S. census has serious problems as a source of data as it underenumerates undocumented migrants. However, the important issue here is to understand the large scale and the significance of the Dominican migration both for the sending as well as for the receiving country, not so much the exact figures. Massey D. & C. Capoferro 2007. Measuring undocumented migration. In Portes A. & J. DeWind *Rethinking Migration New Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*. United States, Berghahn Books, 257-284.

2.1 Migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States

The Dominican large-scale migration is a relatively new phenomenon, dating back less than fifty years. In 1930, a man called Rafael Trujillo participated in a coup to overthrow the democratically elected president Horacio Vasquez. He then went on to become a ruthless dictator de facto running the country for over three decades, even though there were several nominal presidents during that period. During his 31-year reign, he overtook the public sector amassing great wealth to himself, while health and education of the people suffered and rural workers became impoverished. His reign was based on torture, terror and surveillance. (Higman 2011, 259-261) At the same time emigration was very restricted and, for example, in the 1950's less than 10,000 people, mostly his political adversaries fearing for their lives, migrated to the US. After Trujillo's death in 1961, the restrictions were removed and during the years of turmoil that followed his assassination, a military coup in 1963 and the US occupation in 1965, many left the country. (Ibid, 284) Balaguer, the former puppet president of Trujillo, who was established president in 1966 by the US, continued throughout his presidency (1966-1978) economic modernization creating free-trade export zones and rapidly expanding the availability of university education. These policies had a clear urban bias that lead to a massive rural-urban migration so that urban population grew from 30% in 1960 to 64% in 1980. (Ibid, 261 & 279) His rule ended in 1978 when he lost US support and was replaced by a reformist Antonio Guzmán. However, Guzmán betrayed his party and created a corrupted family oligarchy and amassed enormous public debt, killing himself 1982. In 1986 Balaguer returned to power remaining the president until 1996. At the same time, between 1945 and 2010 the population of the country grew fivefold, from two to ten million (Higman 2011, 276). Unemployment in the cities remained high and real wages declined. Immigrants from Haiti flowed to the sugar plantations, keeping the rural wages extremely low. These policies lead to a massive growth of unemployment, underemployment and of emigration. (Georges 1990, 26-38) During the 1960's 84,000 people left legally for the United States and in the 1970's the amount of emigrants exceeded 124,000. (Georges 1990, 26-38) In the United States, most of the migrants settled in New York City and smaller cities along the New York-Boston corridor. (Portes & al 2007, 247)

During the 1980's and an economic recession in the Dominican Republic, the emigration more than doubled to 252,000 (Nurse 2004, 4). In the early 1990's migration continued to grow rapidly, for example, in 1996 alone half a percent of the Dominican population, over 40 000 people, migrated legally to the US (IOM/UN 2001, 235). After the family unification act of the US immigration law was revised in 1996², legal migrant flows started to diminish, first to 27,100 in 1997 and down to 17,500 in 2000. (OECD 2004) During the past decade, the migration figures have again started to increase slowly, and during the first eight years, approximately 183,000 Dominicans have come to the US (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). About 98% of the legal migration from the Dominican Republic to the US takes place under family unification criteria (Martin & al 2002, 587).

Contrary to what one might believe, a typical Dominican migrant today is a young urban professional who often is employed in the Dominican Republic when departing the country. (Portes & al 2007, Martin & al 2002) In the late 1970's and early 1980's urban middle-classes formed the largest source of emigrants, making, for example, in 1979 52% of all the emigrants, while only 24% were of rural origin (Vargas-Lundius 1988, 333). Nowadays, the migration is mostly a working-class phenomenon, but there is still a sizable component of middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs. (Portes & al 2007, 247)

Nyberg Sørensen (1998, 262) reminds us, that while Dominican migrants do share a common participation in transnational migration, not all the migrants share a common experience. These migrants differ in their backgrounds and destinations, their experiences and acceptance in the new community, their connections to the Dominican Republic and many other ways.

Howard (2003a, 65) notes that emigration from the Dominican Republic occurs largely in a policy void, indirectly supported by the recognition of dual citizenship. Migration

² In the immigration act reform a criterion that immigrant's US sponsors must earn at least 125 % of the US poverty line was introduced. (Martin & al 2002, 587)

from the DR has since Trujillo's era been seen as a safety valve lowering social and political pressure and as a source of national income. Until the mid-90's, the government had a 'laissez-faire' attitude towards it. From the nineties on however, the government has been trying to develop policies that encourage return migration, maintain, and add to the commitment of migrants to their old home country. Methods for these include among others dual citizenship, and right and opportunity to vote while living abroad. (Georges 1990, 250; Levitt 2001a, 141)

2.1.1 Undocumented Migration from the Dominican Republic

Undocumented or unauthorized migration is a phenomenon that affects also the opportunities to engage in transnational activities. Even though Dominican Republic does not share land border with the US and undocumented migration has therefore not reached as large proportions as, for example, in the case of Mexico and Central America, it still touches many lives. As getting exact figures on this phenomenon is understandably impossible, the numbers below are based on estimates from several sources. In the beginning of 1980's unauthorized immigrants amounted to less than 20 percent of legal immigrants. (Georges 1990, 41-43) From 1980 to 1990, approximately 110,000 unauthorized migrants crossed the Mona Passage by boat on their way to Puerto Rico. Out of these, approximately 30% succeeded, 60% were returned to the DR and 10% died in the attempt. (Ferguson 1992, 78) In addition to Mona Passage, there are alternative routes to the United States, such as via Mexico and Canada. The most popular way of becoming an undocumented migrant is by extending one's stay after one's visa – most commonly tourist or student visa, has expired. In the 1990's undocumented migration grew as a consequence of tougher requirements imposed on migrants under family unification act by US immigration officials in 1996. (Ferguson 1992, 75-76 & 79; Martin & al 2002, 577 & 587) In the last few years overall unauthorized entries in the United States have been on decline, however, whether this holds true even for Dominicans is unclear (Hoefer & al 2009).

The illegal status of the immigrants affects their lives in many ways. It is very difficult to obtain such basic things as a bank account, insurance or proper education for one's children. A fear of being caught and deported causes strain and can force into poorer

housing where not too many questions are asked. The undocumented migrants often end up in low-paid jobs below their educational level, many times also exploited without possibility to lodge a complaint. Howard (2003a, 63) quotes a commonly heard phrase among migrants: "To have an American visa is to have a profession". Contacts with family and friends back home suffer, as visits to homeland are difficult or impossible without travel documents (Soehl & Waldinger 2010, 1492-1493). Still these migrants work, send their children to school, send money to relatives and live their lives in their new home countries.

2.2 Motives for departure

According to Alejandro Portes, Christina Escobar and Alexandria Walton Radford (2007, 247) motivations to departure are mostly economic, a finding that is supported also by Orozco (2008a, 2008b) according to whom the number one reason for migration was to improve one's standard of living. As long as the Dominican economy continues to suffer from sudden economic crises, the families will want to spread risk and international migration continues to be a viable way of insuring the family against such risks. Orozco's study supports this as well: sending money back home was the second-most quoted reason for migration. Also, 29% of the Dominicans he interviewed during 2008, a year of a sudden economic crisis, seriously considered migrating within a year with 60% quoting high costs of living in the DR as the reason to depart. Therefore migration is likely to continue at high volume, aided by the fact that there are transnational networks that contribute to the social capital that enables continued emigration. Orozco (2008a, 2 & 2008b, 27) estimates that 69% of Dominicans have at least one family member as a migrant and ten percent of the migrants named recommendation from a relative or a friend as a motive for departure.

Very few of Orozco's interviewees mentioned political situation as a reason for departure, which is a change from the early years of Dominican migration. The political situation in the country, though much criticized by many migrants, hardly necessitates migration. In the early years of emigration, the political situation was very unstable. Even after Trujillo, the country was ruled with limited civil liberties and wide-spread corruption by Balaguer until 1978 and after him by Guzmán. In 1986 Balaguer returned

to power remaining the president until 1996. After the election of 1994 in which there were 'inconsistencies' the constitution was amended so that no president could serve two consecutive terms. This has made new long-running dictatorships unlikely and the political situation has stabilized, making emigration for political reasons rare. The constitution has been revised again, now allowing for a maximum of two consecutive terms, or eight years, in power. This has not yet created new attempts to dictatorship, even though the current president is now on his third (and second consecutive) term. (Higman 2011, 260-262)

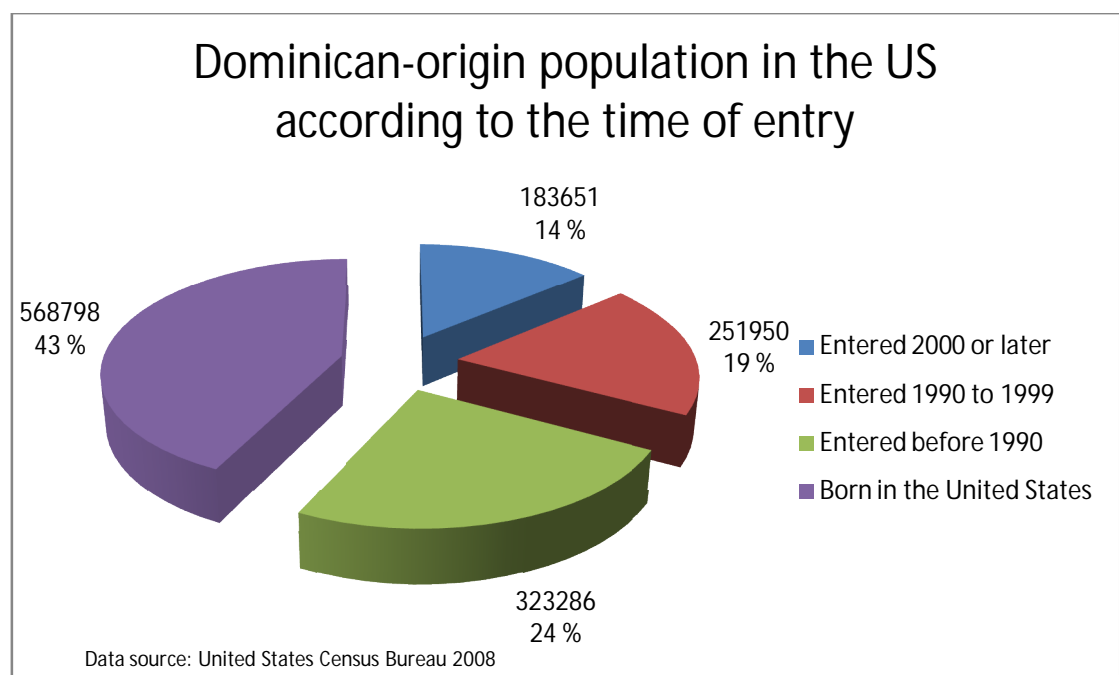
The decision to depart is made easier in addition to the earlier-mentioned networks and connections, also by the geographic proximity of the US and the DR. This proximity facilitates travel back and forth and even enables some to manage two different households. One is often with elderly parents and/or siblings in the Dominican Republic and the other with spouse and children in the US, or alternatively with spouse and children living in the DR and the migrant living alone and earning money in the US trying to support the family back home. One way of managing this is investing in small-scale enterprises in hometowns. (Morawska 2003, 140)

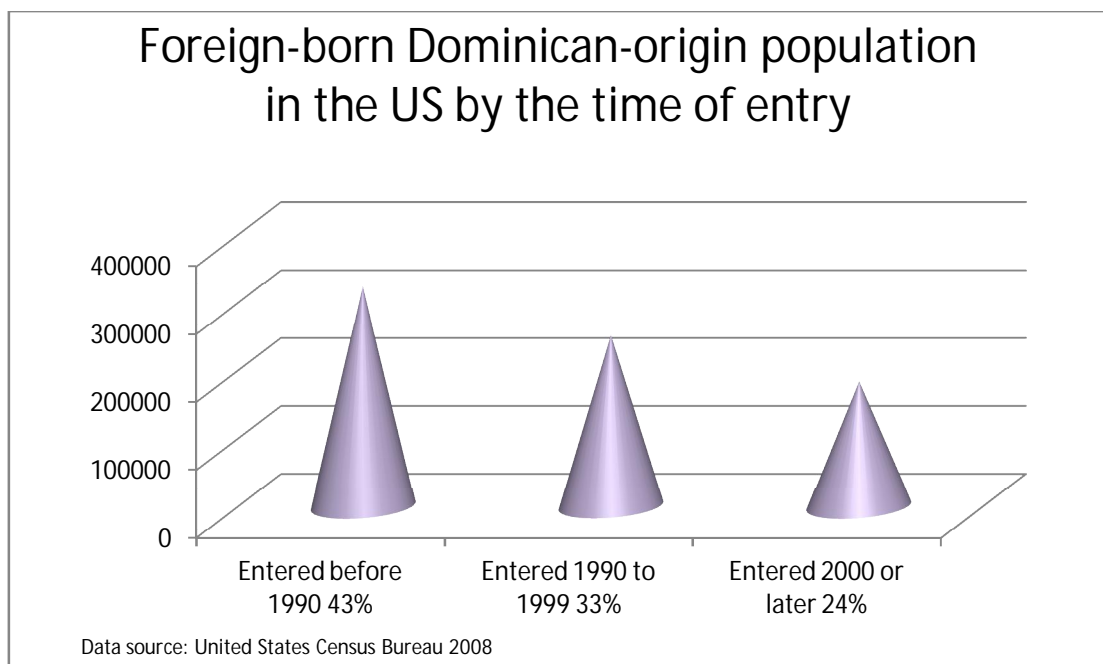
2.3 Dominicans in the United States

Today the Dominican Republic is a nation with a large diaspora community in the United States. This diaspora consisting of an estimated 1.2 to 1.6 million people is concentrated mainly in three states: New York, New Jersey and Florida. Over half reside in the New York metropolitan area, making Dominicans the largest immigrant group there. This also makes New York the second-largest Dominican city, second only to the capital Santo Domingo. Most Dominicans in New York are concentrated on a very small area in upper Manhattan called Washington Heights. Other important Dominican cities in the US include Miami, Bergen (NJ), Boston and Jersey City. Since 1990's, the trend has been towards de-concentration, for example, Providence, Rhode Island, is one of several popular cities of secondary migration for Dominicans moving out of the Heights. (Itzigsohn & al 1999, 321; MPI 2004; Portes & al 2007)

Dominicans, that have a relatively brief history of mass migration, currently constitute one of the fastest-growing and most residentially concentrated groups of immigrants in the US (Guarnizo 1997, 283). Out of the 1.3 million people of Dominican descent that the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) estimates are living in the United States today, 570,000 were born in the US while 760,000 are foreign-born. Out of the foreign-born Dominican population, approximately 360,000 have US citizenship, while 400,000 are not citizens. However, many of the naturalized US citizens and even those that have been born in the US still claim what Victoria Bernal (2006, 164) calls 'emotional citizenship' of the Dominican Republic, they are emotionally drawn into Dominican politics and claim Dominican national identity, even if they would have no intention of ever living there again. According to Luis Guarnizo (1997, 289), Dominican migrants often have a very flexible identity, being Dominican immigrants in the US and Americanized Dominicans or *Dominicanyorks* while on the island.

The U.S. Census Bureau statistics (2008) show the Dominican-descent population according to the time of entry. 43% were born in the US (see graphs below). Out of the 760,000 foreign-born Dominican people in the US 43% have entered the country prior to 1990, 33% during the 1990's and 24% have entered year 2000 or after.





Dominicans have also political weight in the US and especially in New York. Dominicans started participating in local politics as a distinct constituency relatively recently, only since twenty years ago. However, already in 1991 they succeeded in getting a Dominican-born representative in the City Council and in 1996 in the State Assembly. They also have representatives in several other city organs. The political relevance of the Dominicans has increased in NYC and their role as potential voters makes the local politicians pay closer attention to them. (Guarnizo 1997, 306 & 309) The assimilation of Dominican immigrants in New York has according to Ewa Morawska (2003, 142) evolved within the ethnic group and through ethnic channels.

2.4 *Effects of migration on the Dominican Republic*

The large scale of the migration and the relatively short time in which it has occurred, has caused a large transformation in the Dominican society (Itzigsohn et al 1999, 318). Below there is a discussion based on prior research on economic, political and socio-cultural effects that the transnational migration has on the Dominican Republic. As these effects of the migration are significant, it is important for the DR to keep its emigrants committed to the old home. (Levitt 2001a, 141) Transnationalism most often starts on the economic arena and spreads from there to political and socio-cultural fields. José Itzigsohn, Carlos Dore Cabral, Esther Hernández Medina and Obed

Vásquez (1999, 335-336) argue that in the 1980's and 1990's as Dominican remittances grew drastically in total volume, they started to gain significant importance for the national economy of the country. Therefore migrant communities abroad also became central to the political life of the island. That, according to Itzigsohn & al (ibid) was when Dominican migration became a transnational phenomenon. As a consequence, the imagined boundaries of 'Dominicanness' are expanding.

Below, the arguments are most often concentrated at the effects on the national level. However, it is important to remember that the significance of transnational migration is even more vital at the local level, in towns and communities and for individuals and households. (Portes 2001, 191)

2.4.1 Economic effects

The economic effects of large-scale migration are significant especially to a developing country. The remittances alone form the second-largest source of national income for Dominican Republic after tourism. In 2009, the inflow of remittances was estimated at 3.4 billion dollars or around 9.3% of the GDP (UNDP 2009, 160). Diasporic tourism annually brings between USD 0.5-1.275 billion to DR (Orozco 2003). Nostalgic exports and migrant investments also bring much-needed income and economic activity to the country. Transnational migrants have generated new forms of consumption and investment in the Dominican economy and brought hard currency (Howard 2003a, 60). According to Carlos Dore, an advisor to President Leonel Fernández, migrants are the "sine qua non for Dominican macroeconomic stability" i.e. indispensable to the economy of the country (Guarnizo 1997, 7).

Migration also has adverse economic effects, of which brain drain is an example. According to some calculations, 14-16% of all Dominicans with higher education live in the United States (Carrington & Detragiache 1998, 19) and it has been concluded in several studies that the country indeed suffers from the consequences of brain drain (see for example Adams 2003 and Thomas-Hope 2002).

2.4.2 Political effects

Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2003, 209) notes that many sending countries are reconfiguring their often marginal global position by reaching out to their emigrants also for political support. According to Guarnizo (1997, 309) Dominican transnational migrants' migratory experience has since the 1960's been characterized by simultaneous socio-political exclusion and economic inclusion. He predicted that this inclusion/exclusion antinomy is coming to an end. The political relevance of the migrants has increased in both the DR as well as the US. Dual citizenship was approved in 1994 and the same year external voting was made possible in the presidential elections with polling places in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and in Florida and New York (Rea 2010, 36). A transnational migrant, Leonel Fernández Reyna, was elected president in 1996, and again in 2004 and 2008 (Higman 2011, 261). After his re-election in 2004, the president established National Presidential Advisory Councils for Dominicans Abroad (Consejos Consultivos de la Presidencia para los Dominicanos en el Exterior, CCPDE). In 2008, a law was passed creating for the first time a permanent governmental body called CONDEX (Consejo Nacional para las Comunidades Dominicanas en el Exterior ~ National Council for Dominican Communities Abroad). CONDEX is to design and execute a participatory process to coordinate policies, programs, projects and actions that will connect and integrate the Dominican communities abroad to the development of the country. (CONDEX 2008, Portes & al 2007) How well this Council will succeed in its task remains to be seen, yet this has been a significant step in formalizing the status of the Dominican diaspora by the Dominican state.

In the 2002 elections 4.6 million Dominicans were eligible to vote. Out of these, nearly one million lived abroad. (Howard 2003a, 67) Despite this, external voting is still a relatively marginal phenomenon for Dominicans. For one, external voting is so far possible only in presidential elections and even in those, for example, in the 2004 elections, only about 54,000 exercised this right. Despite expectations, external voting arrangements and political representation for migrants in the Dominican Congress have not been formally approved. Howard (2003a, 74) found that there appeared to be an almost conscious effort by politicians to downplay the significance of migrated

Dominicans, despite the fact that they were an important source of campaign finances. However, several migrants with primary residence abroad have lately been allowed to run for office from their original home communities, by the initiative of political parties. The main political parties in the DR realize the potential of the migrants and they all have offices in the major migrant destinations. At present, migrants are seen more as major donors to the political parties than as potential voters. One of the main three parties has actively encouraged migrants to become dual citizens in order for them to have a more secure position and being better able to advocate for Dominican interest in the US. (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network 2007; Guarnizo 1997, 305-306; Levitt & Nyberg Sørensen 2004, 5, Rea 2010)

Alejandro Portes, Luis Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt (2007) researched immigrant transnational organizations from Columbia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. They found that compared to the others, Dominican organizations stem largely from home country politics, political parties playing an important role even in migrant communities abroad. This reflects the heavy influence of political parties in the DR and, in part, the political nature of the early waves of Dominican migration during the 1960's and 1970's.

2.4.3 Socio-cultural effects

Socio-cultural effects include various aspects such as national identity issues, religion, cultural transformations, sports and cultural events. These activities take place in national (governmental) level, in transnational organizations, in villages and towns and at an individual level. Below, there is a brief glance on some of these aspects based on prior research among Dominican migrants.

As Levitt & Glick Shiller (2004, 1019) point out, some states encourage enduring links to permanent settlers abroad to ensure their continued national membership and loyalty, rather than their return. Therefore, governments are taking a more active role also in the transnational social and cultural practices. Methods can include strengthening migrants' cultural identification with the country of origin by organizing events and celebrations, for example, independence day festivities, sports events or

poetry contests. (Levitt 2001b, 207) Consulates are more proactive towards the immigrant communities and provide a variety of services that assist their nationals in coping in their new living environment, such as legal assistance, identification cards, health assistance and language courses in both country of origin and in the receiving country languages. Even if diplomats and government officials are promoting and guiding the economic, political and socio-cultural transnational activities of their nationals abroad, these activities emerged by the initiative of the immigrants themselves. However, Portes & al (2007, 253 & 277) conclude that so far Dominican government's efforts have rarely been more than symbolic, as the government is too weak and too poor to implement large-scale programs with concrete benefits to its emigrants.

Guarnizo (1997, 282) states that transnational ties have become widespread among 'common' Dominican people. These transnational processes are manifested among other things by back-and-forth travel, multidirectional exchanges of material and intangible resources and symbols between the US and the DR. According to him, the Dominican society, including state and the civil society, is as closely connected to transnational migrants as it is to any other group residing in the national territory. Also new forms of consumption and investment arriving through transnational connections have influenced cultural transitions and popular opinion in the Dominican Republic. (Howard 2003a, 60)

Many transnational organizations also operate on philanthropic field dealing with issues relating to, for example, education, health or care of children or the elderly in the country or community of origin. Dominican organizations were often born out of a spontaneous grassroots initiative in response to natural disasters or other national emergencies. Regardless of origin, members of these organizations are older, better established in the new home country and possess a higher level of education than migrants on average. These organizations carry enough weight to attract the attention of the sending government. (Portes & al 2007)

Levitt (1998) studied the religious connections caused by transnational migration between Dominican Miraflores community and Boston. She found organizational and value changes in the religious (catholic) institutions and particularly day-to-day religious life in these two communities that were caused by the migration and the expansion over national boundaries. This has led to more pan-ethnic (pan-Latino) religious practices in both communities, something in which many non-religious organizations according to Levitt (ibid.) seem to be failing.

Dominican Republic is a country with five decades of intensive emigration of its people mainly to the US. As the economic role of migrants is very important to the national economy, and the government does not want to lose it, also the political importance of emigrants is growing. Due to the scale of the past migration and the fact that the migration still continues strong, it is evident that there are effects to social and cultural lives of the Dominican Republic as well. Next we will turn to the theories around the phenomenon of transnational migration.

3 Theoretical framework and methodology

In this study, the theoretical framework consists of the concepts of transnationalism, identity and communities. First I will discuss transnationalism in broader terms before focusing on transnational migration. Then I will turn to the concept of identity and look at migrant identity and identity in online situations. Thirdly I will look at communities and migrant communities. Thereafter I will turn to virtual communities, social network sites and Facebook. The second part of this chapter consists of an introduction to the methodology employed in this study as well as a discussion on research ethics and my role as a researcher.

3.1 *Transnationalism and transnational migration*

Today transnationalism is a popular starting point to researching migration – as well as other cross-border activities. Steven Vertovec (2009, 2) notes that interest in sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations crossing borders is occurring simultaneously with growing social scientific interest in globalization. Increasing transnational connections between social groups are a central manifestation of globalization.

3.1.1 *Premises of transnationalism related to my study*

Transnationalism can and has been defined in many different ways. For example, Vertovec (2009, v) uses a simple definition: “Transnationalism refers to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation states.” Transnationalism can be regarded from various conceptual premises. Vertovec (ibid, 4-13) takes up six such premises and looks at transnationalism as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement and as (re)construction of place or locality.

In the following, I will examine these six premises and try to illustrate them with examples from my own study. *Transnationalism as social morphology* looks at the phenomenon as different kinds of social formations crossing borders. Diasporas and transnational communities are the focal point for this kind of research and the structures and systems of relationships or networks are central to the analysis. My

study looks at one type of such social formation and tries to analyze a system of networks in play online in the social media. Research considering *transnationalism* mainly as a *type of consciousness* often focuses in looking at multiple identities of migrants, their common experiences that link people into communities. The concentration lies often within the multi-locality that encourages contacts with others with similar experiences and background, with similar 'routes' and 'roots'³. I will examine how 'Dominicanness' is reconstructed by common experiences of multi-locality. *Transnationalism* can be seen as a *mode of cultural reproduction*, cultural blending or syncretism. Fashion, music, film, visual arts and language are some fields where one can detect signs of this process and these get a lot of attention on the groups studied. In my previous study examining the economic effects of the 'new migration', I concentrated in looking at *transnationalism as an avenue of capital*. Remittances, tourism, exports, investments and philanthropy all imply flow of capital back and forth and throughout the network. This prompts many countries to try to reincorporate their emigrated nationals into their old home country and at an individual level often represents a strategy of spreading the household or family assets due to economic or other reasons. The social network sites do not function directly as an avenue of capital. There are, however some indirect linkages e.g. through advertising and discussions on philanthropy and employment. *Transnationalism* can also be seen as offering a *site for political engagement* for issues that do not fit into national politics. There is a wide variety of international non-governmental organizations and transnational social movements that work in such areas as the environment, human rights and development. Transnational political activities can also be undertaken by individuals of the diaspora also via social media as evidenced by the data from the groups I study. Finally, *transnationalism as (re)construction of 'place' or locality* research suggests that transnationalism has changed people's relation to space by creating transnational social spaces that connect and position some actors in more than one country and that many people have difficulties in relating to just a single locality. The internet has been one central media in creating translocal understandings.

³ Discussion on the routes and roots in Hall 1999 (250-251)

3.1.2 *Transnational migration and migrant transnationalism*

Transnational migration theory was born in 1990's out of necessity to overcome the dichotomy of seeing a migrant as just either a departing emigrant or arriving immigrant. Transnational migration theory tries to capture migrants' multiple attachments. (Levitt & Nyberg Sørensen 2004, 2) The concept was first introduced in migration research by a pioneering work of Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Christina Blanc-Szanton (1992). They defined transnationalism as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (ibid. 7). They identified transnational migrants as those, whose "lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field" (ibid. 8). According to them, rather than seeing migrants as units of labour – as world systems theorists do – it is important to understand that, the transnational context of migrants' lives develops from the interplay of historical experience, structural conditions, and the ideologies of their home and host countries. They argue that while transnational migrants often find themselves having categories for self-identification imposed upon them by the host society, they can use transnational social practices in choosing their own identities. (ibid. 14-19)

Levitt & Nyberg Sørensen (2004, 3) argue that transnational approach to migration begins with the understanding that migrants are to be studied within transnational social fields. Much of research on transnational migration sees the new social formations created by it as something unique. However, according to Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, 1009) it is but one indicator that the nation-state container view of society is not able to sufficiently capture the complex interconnectedness of today's world. That is why a transnational social field approach is needed; it distinguishes between the existence of transnational social networks and the consciousness of being embedded in them. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, 1011-1013) draw in their definition on Bourdieu who used the concept of social fields to draw attention to the way in which social relationships are structured by power. They define social field as a "*set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed*" (ibid. 1009). Social fields allow us to move beyond the direct experience of migration into

interaction where individuals that do not move themselves (including, for example, second- and third-generation migrants) maintain social relations across borders. A social field perspective reveals a difference between ways of *being in* social field and ways of *belonging to* one. *Being* refers to actual social relations and practices rather than identities associated to these actions. An individual can be embedded in a social field but does not identify with the label or cultural politics associated with it. Ways of *belonging* to a social field refers to practices that enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group. These actions are concrete and visible, for example, flying a flag or choosing a particular cuisine. Ways of belonging therefore combine action and an awareness of the identity that the action signifies. Individuals in transnational social fields combine ways of being and belonging differently in specific contexts. Some may be engaged in transnational activities without identifying with the homeland whereas others may have limited or no actual social relations to the country of origin yet they actively assert their identification to that particular group. (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1003-1005)

Transnational practices and discourses are not a homogenous set, nor are they equally used by all. Transnationalism can reproduce and exacerbate inequality along class, gender, generational and regional lines (Guarnizo 1997, 304). The desire and ability to engage in transnational practices also varies at different phases in life and in different contexts (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1018).

Migrants often have a dual frame of reference, a tendency to always compare and contrast their situation in their host society with their previous experiences in the country of origin (Guarnizo 1997, 310). Portes & al (1999, 217) describe people affected by transnational migration as persons leading dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries and making a living through regular contact across national borders. Vertovec (2007, 153-154) in turn notes the migrants' awareness of aspects of life both 'here' and 'there' – the events in both places are constantly monitored and perceived as complementary aspects of a single space of experience. In migrant households that are constituted transnationally and across generations, living transnationally often becomes the norm. An example of this is

children of migrants that are brought up in households where people, values, goods and claims from somewhere else are present on a daily basis. This somewhere else may be a place the children have never seen or only just visited. (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1017) Conway & Potter (2007, 34) observe that the migration movements are no longer only bipolar; they are increasingly developing into multi-local networks of movement. Migrants are connecting with other migrants from the same source country or community in other countries and communities and they are also moving to new communities within the host country and to third countries, thus creating new nodes for migration networks.

3.1.2.1 Transnational categories as tools in my analysis

The concept of transnational migration has been seen to encompass a wide variety of cross-border contacts, at times making excessive claims on permanent back-and-forth movement and de-territorialized communities. An effort was therefore made by among others Portes & al (1999) to define the term more rigorously, thus making empirical measurement possible. They sought to distinguish regular and/or institutionalized involvement in cross-border activities from occasional individual and informal activity. Itzigsohn & al (1999) in turn made a distinction between broad and narrow transnational social practices. According to them, narrow transnationalism refers to people involved in regular movement within the geographic transnational field, high level of institutionalization or constant personal involvement. 'Broad' transnationalism in turn contains also material and symbolic practices that involve only sporadic physical movement between the two countries, low level of institutionalization or just occasional personal involvement but still includes both countries as reference points. (Ibid. 323) Virtual transnational activities fall for the most part into the 'broad' transnationalism category. Itzigsohn & al divide transnational practices into four categories: *economic, political, societal and cultural practices*. I will employ these categories in my analysis. The categories are not mutually exclusive; same practices can fall into several groups, as they are socially embedded and carry several dimensions with them. The categories are nevertheless a useful tool in the analysis. Economic practices are a much researched field including, for example, remittance sending and diasporic exports. Political practices include a variety of things from voting to fundraising and extraparlimentary activities. Societal practices include

various community practices as diverse as religious practices, sports and mutual-help that are not political or market-oriented. Cultural practices include symbolic practices such as the formation of identities, tastes and values. (Ibid. 324)

Levitt (2001b, 199) argues that transnationalism in the context of migration is not only that numerous individuals live their lives across borders but that a significant number from a given place of origin and settlement *share this experience collectively thus transforming the way they see themselves as a group*. This is an interesting argument, that I have not come across elsewhere, yet I find it compelling. In case of Dominicans in the US, the critical mass is no doubt achieved to create a shared collective experience and a group identity.

3.1.3 Critique against transnational migration theories

According to Portes (2001) criticism against the concepts of transnationalism and transnational migrants derive from several reasons. In the early literature, there was very little empirical research to support this topic which led to the overestimation of the phenomenon. Another problem has been the unclear definition and varied meaning of the terms and a failure to distinguish between the different transnational activities and actors as discussed above. Criticism comes from among others Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald (2004) and Roger Waldinger (2008). Waldinger and Fitzgerald claim that immigrants have always been engaged in cross-border activities and that transnationalism has nothing new to offer. It is true that cross-border activities have existed long before transnationalism was ever discussed. However, as among others Portes & al (2007, 254) noted, before the term transnationalism was coined, the common character and significance of this phenomenon remained obscure. The concept provided a new perspective and generated a novel set of hypotheses about the patterns of migrant settlement and adaptation (Portes 2001, 182). Therefore, also Waldinger and Fitzgerald step into the fallacy of adumbration – negating the value of a scientific discovery by pointing to earlier instances of it. (Portes & al 2007, 254)

In his article from 2008, Waldinger argues that even if migrants regularly engage in trans-state social action, there is little evidence of transnationalism as a condition of being or transmigrants as a separate group of migrants. While I am not trying to categorize immigrants according to whether s/he engages in enough transnational activities to be considered a 'transmigrant', I do see transnationalism as a condition of being. Waldinger supports his argument with a statistical analysis of six groups of Latino migrants in the United States: Colombian, Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, Salvadoran and all other Latin American countries. Waldinger may use a wide set of variables for a statistical analysis, yet seen from a wider definition of transnational migration he concentrates on a very limited set of transnational activities that he actually measures (remittances, travel, voting, settlement plans, and respondents' answers to homeland and identity). This leads to a result where transnational activities of most migrants seem detached from their everyday realities, after all, elections are mostly held four years apart, most cannot constantly travel back-and-forth between the two countries and citizenship does not fully define everyone's national identity. Waldinger discusses contacts between old and new home and states that new technologies are crucial in maintaining firm connections to homeland. Yet he at the same time chooses to omit contacts with homeland other than travel and remittances from his statistical analysis. He also defines political activity extremely narrowly as voting, overlooking other types of political activity commonly found among migrants – such as lobbying, demonstrating and organizing campaigns (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1025). He remarks on the shift from melting pot to multiculturalism as legitimating the expression of an organization around home country loyalties. However, he does not at all discuss the role of migrant community activities in the United States. Therefore, I find Waldinger's criticisms somewhat irrelevant at the context of this study and choose to use the terminology contested by him. Interestingly enough, in his statistical analysis Waldinger finds that even with the narrow definition of transnational activities there was some evidence of transnationalism. Out of the six groups examined, the Dominicans engage on average most in those trans-border activities he included in his study. Thus, the Dominicans truly seem to make a good object of study also for my purposes.

I have in this section discussed transnational premises, transnational migration and its critique as well transnational categories employed in my study. Next, I will turn to the concepts of identity and community.

3.2 Identity construction, national and migrant identity

The concept of identity is important while looking at migrant communities. Hall (1990, 1999) discusses identity and concludes that it is not the transparent or unproblematic phenomenon as usually understood. According to him, identities pertain to how the resources offered by history, language and culture are used in becoming something rather than being someone. Identity is not a permanent fact; instead, it is constantly being reproduced. It is never finished, but is continuously being processed and reformed while presenting one's identity to others, within a discourse. Identities emerge out of translating 'me' into stories. Identity is not so much about 'who we are' or 'where we came from' but instead 'who we may become'. It is affected by the way we are represented and by the way we present ourselves. According to Hall (ibid.), identity today is more and more fragmented, never formed around a single factor such as nationality or ethnicity but instead it is formed by a multitude of different, often intersecting and conflicting discourses, practices and positions. In other words, identities are points in which we attach ourselves temporarily in the subject positions that discursive practices construct us, they are like positions we must assume even though we know that they are only partial representations of ourselves. Yet identities are not formed only internally, they are affected by and contain elements of the external – the context in which we live and people we interact with. As identities are formed within a discourse, they should also be examined in specific historical and institutional contexts. (Hall 1999, 223 & 250-254) That is why I will now briefly revisit the concept of identity in the contexts of migration and cultural identity and identity in online situations.

3.2.1 Cultural identity and migrant identities

Cultural identity is not easy to define. It is perhaps easier to start by reflecting what it is *not*. Cultural identity is not the collective or true 'self' that hides within several other, shallower or artificially added identities. Cultural identity cannot stabilize, attach

to or guarantee an unchanging unity or cultural belonging to something that would act as a ground for other, shallower differences. (Hall 1990, 223) Yet as Vertovec (2007, 158) points out, some sense of identity is believed to be contiguous with a national territory. That is why migrant transnationalism inherently involves questions of identity. Hall (1990, 226) maintains that cultural identities are unstable points of identification which are made within the discourses of history and culture. He emphasizes that it is not an essence but a *positioning*, it is not a fixed origin to which one can make a final Return. Cultural identities of migrants are not about returning to roots as much as about relating to the routes they have taken. (Hall 1999, 250-251) Denis-Constant Martin (1995, 17) claims that identities by themselves do not exist. He, like Hall, argues that identities are constructed by identity narratives. These, according to him, attempt at imagining communities to lock up human groups within fantasmatic boundaries. Nyberg Sørensen (1998, 246) maintains that for transnational migrants several identity narratives are in competition. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (2003, 216-216-221) list collective identities of migrants in the public sphere. These identities include 1) categories offered by the receiving state's authorities, such as immigrants, foreigners, minorities, 2) racial identities such as blacks, 3) religious identities e.g. Catholic, Protestant, Hindu or Muslim, 4) ethnicity and nationality of the country of origin and 5) ethno-religious groups such as Jews and Sikhs. The first four are relevant in this study. Another collective migrant identity is pan-ethnicity such as Latino or Hispanic (see Portes & al 2007, 245). Hall (1990, 235) explains that the diaspora experience of migrants is defined by the recognition of heterogeneity and diversity, of hybridity. According to him, diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves through transformation and difference.

3.2.2 *Identity in online situations*

As discussed above, it is acknowledged that individuals have multiple identities and negotiated roles within different socio-political and cultural contexts. How is this reflected in online situations? People use several media to develop their identities in ways that carry over to other settings. Often offline social roles and cultural ideologies are played and exaggerated in online communication. (Wilson & Peterson 2002, 456-457) Thomas Tufte (2002, 258) concludes that the internet provides more

opportunities for experimenting with social and cultural, collective and individual identities. Olga Davydova (2006, 56) found in her study that using the internet in transnational identity construction seems to become a permanent social phenomenon. Identities, also migrant identities are constantly being reproduced in the discussions of online communities.

3.3 Concept of community and migrant communities

The concept of community is often debated and even questioned when online groups are under study. Yet the concept is not simple and clear-cut even outside in the 'real world' as discussed by among others Manuel Castells (2001 125-129) Barry Wellman & Milena Gulia (1999, 333-335) and Samuel Wilson & Leighton Peterson (2002, 455-456). Community as a term can imply false circumscription and coherence. In the past, a community was seen as a localized and self-contained, although Castells is doubtful as to whether such a culturally homogeneous and spatially bounded community has ever existed. Sociologists have recognized that many changes before the internet have also been seen as a threat to communities, for example, capitalism, industrialization, bureaucratization, urbanization and other major technological changes, such as the invention of telephone. These changes did not destroy community but helped transform its composition, practices, attitudes and communicative practices (Quan-Haase & Wellman 2004, 115). Communities persist despite all these changes. They just do not exist only in isolated villages or tightly-knit neighbourhoods. There is heterogeneity within communities and the members of a community interact with others outside the specific community. Nor does an individual necessarily belong to only one community, but can belong to several communities in differing degrees. A community can consist of, for example, kin, friends or workmates. Yet members of a community must share at least some customs, values or memories in order to be able to create a sense of communality.

As can be noted from above, a fluid concept of community is needed, one that is not spatially-bounded and does not require exclusivity. The concept should take into account multi-sited situations, complex, spatially diverse communities and translocal sites. (Wellman 2001 Wellman & Gulia 1999, 333-335; Wilson & Peterson 2002, 455-

456) Therefore, community here is not defined in terms of space, but is seen as a *social network that provides companionship, social support, information and a sense of belonging* (Wellman 2001, 1).

3.3.1 *Migrant communities*

Benedict Anderson (1983) discussed nationalism and concluded that nations are in fact 'imagined communities' that exist because people imagine them to exist. Eric C. Thompson (2009, 362) takes this argument even further, he argues that all communities are imagined communities. This does not, according to him, mean that they are not real. Migrant communities can therefore also exist because people believe in them. The migrants turn to each other for companionship, social support and information because they believe that there is a sense of belonging among the fellow migrants, engendering a sense of community thus making the community real.

As among Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) argued, migrant communities are nothing new, but have existed for a long time. This is certainly true when thinking back to 19th and 20th centuries and, for example, Irish migrants coming to the US or Italians to Argentina. Those days, migrants were seen as emigrants and immigrants leaving their home country once and for all and expected to assimilate to their new surroundings. Nowadays, migrant identity is becoming more accepted and many scholars point out that incorporation in the receiving community is not a contradictory process with maintenance of transnational connections, but they can actually reinforce one another (see for example Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004 & Portes & al 1999). It is often the same actors that engage in politics both in the country of origin and in the country of residence (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, 137). This growing acceptance of multi-faceted identities combined with improved communication technologies and faster travel changes migrant communities. At the same time some migrant communities having achieved a critical mass and continuous migration flows between the same sending and receiving communities are creating a shared, collective transnational experience. When talking about a shared transnational experience, it is important to remember that not all migrants from the same country are the same. Migrants are a heterogeneous group that possess distinct personal and social endowments, come

from different circumstances and profess regional cultural differences. (Guarnizo & Smith 1998, 14)

Why are migrant communities or migrant networks important? Vertovec (2009, 39) points out, that migration is a process that depends on and creates social networks. Charles Tilly (1990, 84) claims that the effective units of migration are not individuals or households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship and work experience. Monica Boyd (1989, 641) argues that migration flows often become self-sustaining due to networks of information, assistance and obligations that developed between migrants and their relatives and friends back home. Communities are therefore vital for continued migration and are essential to the adjustment of new migrants in the host country, by assisting e.g. in finding employment and accommodation. Also, as discussed previously, they are crucial in order to maintain the loyalties of emigrants, something which is important especially to developing countries at a national, community and individual levels. As stated previously, living transnationally often becomes the norm in migrant communities enabling the home country to maintain the loyalties of second- or third generation migrants that have never actually lived in the country of origin of their families. (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, 1017)

3.4 Virtual communities

The term 'virtual community' calls attention to the emergence of new technological supports for sociability. However, as it contains the term 'community', that has powerful connotations, it has prompted ideological discussions on the definition of the term. Castells (2001, 130) prefers the term networks of sociability and as the new patterns of sociability are according to him based on individualism, the internet supports the creation of a new form of society – network society. Yet, with the more fluid definition of communities as social networks that provide companionship, social support, information and a sense of belonging, communities can very well exist also in the virtual realm. Opposing face-to-face and virtual communities may cause us to miss the way in which communities employ a whole ecology of media in their communication (Wilson & Peterson 2002, 456). Virtual communities are often compared to an ideal of a community rather than actual face-to-face communities

(Kollock & Smith 1999, 16). Online communication is, in essence, socially produced space. (Jones 1995, 17)

Anita Blanchard (2004, 55) defines virtual communities as “groups of people that interact primarily through computer-mediated communication and identify with and have developed feelings of belonging and attachment to each other.” The feelings are known as a ‘sense of community’. As interacting members of an online group share some communicative practices, beliefs and norms to be able to communicate, they constitute a speech community (Wilson & Peterson 2002, 459). The concept of virtuality refers to communication that utilizes the internet. However, often an underlying connotation of ‘not-real’ or ‘quasi’ is identified with the concept. Therefore, all virtual communities are often seen as something not real and without causal effects outside the virtual world. That is misleading. (Kupiainen 2004, 352) Communality has been an aspect of the internet from the very beginning. Already at the dawn of the computer era, early users of computer networks created virtual communities. In the 1980’s there were already many communities and with the expansion of the World Wide Web in 1990’s the growth was explosive. The communitarian culture has shaped its social forms, processes and uses. (Castells 2001, 52-55)

Virtual communities work on two common features: horizontal free communication and what Castells (2001, 55) calls self-directed networking, the capacity for anyone to find his or her own destination on the Internet. (Ibid. 52-55) This was also discussed by Katja Laitinen (2003, 357-361). She argues that even though the internet is often referred to as an endless, chaotic cyberspace, the users do not experience it as such. They orientate online based on specific addresses, links and search tools.

3.4.1 Boundaries

Steve G. Jones (1995, 11) contemplates whether the nature of interaction is different when community membership is a simple matter of subscribing to a specific internet site from which one may disengage with little or no consequence. Malin Sveningsson (2001) studied how people in web chats create a sense of community. She found that boundaries were essential to the creation of a community in a space that is in principle

open to all. The active participants or insiders of chat rooms built boundaries to include and to exclude, in that way creating a sense of belonging and shared identity. In the groups she studied, these boundaries were created by showing affinity with insiders and opposing outsiders in many ways, for example, by gathering around certain activities, by using a shared communicative style and by abiding to commonly created norms and conventions. The insiders were expected to participate actively, show reciprocity in sharing knowledge and showing interest in the issues other participants chose to share of their lives. (Sveningsson 2001; 160-163, 230-236)

3.4.2 Social order and control

According to Peter Kollock & Marc Smith (1999, 12-14), social control rests on a group's ability to identify individuals to hold them responsible. In virtual communities typical approaches are mediation, punishment and ostracism. Concrete actions can be mediating an argument by inviting for a factual discussion of common fact-finding, restricting the rights of the person acting out of order (breaking the agreed rules), allowing for the other users to report bad behaviour i.e. relying on moral entrepreneurs, shaming and humiliating the transgressor or as a final resort, banishing the wrong-doer from the community.

3.4.3 The role of virtual communities

A number of authors have discussed themes related to ties in virtual communities. According to Castells (2001, 127-128), most ties people have are so-called 'weak ties'. This does not mean that they are unimportant. As Jari KUPIAINEN (2004, 355) states, weak ties are often crucial in the context of migration. Online communities support first and foremost these weak ties, which otherwise often would be lost in the trade-off between the time and energy required for other type of interaction and the value of the communication (Ibid. 129). Vertovec (2009, 56) notes that real-time communications serve as a kind of social glue connecting families and other small-scale social formations around the world. He is referring to cheap phone calls, but this applies to internet contacts and social network sites as well, perhaps even for formations in larger scale than telephone communications allow for. Mitzuko Ito & Daisuke Okabe (2003, 7) discuss ambient virtual co-presence as a way of maintaining ongoing background awareness of others, and of keeping multiple channels of

communication open. They use the term to describe text messaging but social network sites can be seen as a particularly well-suited medium for this; with a single update, one can tell tens or even hundreds of friends about what is going on in one's life.

Kupiainen (2004, 357) points out that the internet is opening up new modes and forms of communality, not just supporting technologically the existing modes. The new modes do not necessarily follow the old models, structures and hierarchies as in the localized communities. According to Anabel Quan-Haase and Barry Wellman (2004, 116) the internet has blended into the rhythm of everyday life and is affecting the way in which people communicate, work and use their free time. The internet is an interactive information and discussion channel. It combines the features of traditional media, newspaper and television with interactive communication methods such as letters and phone. (Davydova 2006, 46). It is at the same time both a private and a public space.

Wellman & Gulia (1999, 335-356) conceptualize virtual communities around seven questions: 1) are online relationships narrow and specialized and what support is available? 2) What effects do the weaker relationships on the internet have? 3) Is there reciprocity and attachment in virtual communities? 4) Are strong relationships possible online? 5) How does online community affect face-to-face community involvement? 6) Does virtuality increase diversity of a community? 7) Are virtual communities 'real' communities? I will analyze the groups I study through these questions.

3.4.4 Prior research on ethnic virtual communities

There is prior research on ethnic online communities, for example, Davydova (2009) has examined Russians in Finland, Neil Blair Christensen (2003) studied Inuit in cyberspace, Daniel Miller & Don Slater (2000) explored Trinidadians online and Bernal (2006) studied the Eritrean diaspora. Some of their findings will be discussed in the following chapters. But first a closer look at social network sites and especially Facebook as a site for virtual communities.

3.4.5 Social network sites and the Facebook

As mentioned in the definitions section Boyd & Ellison (2007) define social network sites “as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” In practice this means that social network sites enable users to articulate and make visible both their social networks and themselves through their profiles. Most sites provide a mechanism for users to leave messages on their Friends' profiles and often also enable private messaging similar to e-mail and chat. Beyond these the sites vary greatly in their features and user base.

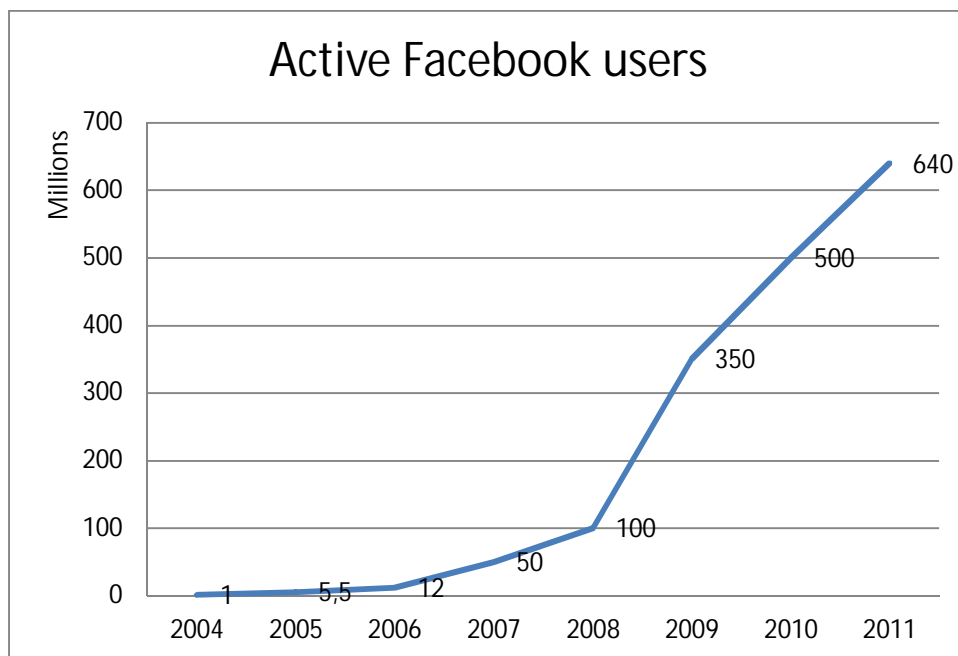
The first recognizable social network SixDegrees.com site was launched in 1997. SixDegrees.com allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists. (Ibid.) Today there are hundreds, if not thousands of social network sites. Examples of popular social network sites include Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, Hi5, and LinkedIn. They differ in user base and functions but they all have over 80 million users, with Facebook being the largest with over 640 million users⁴.

On Facebook corporate information page there is a description of the site (Facebook 2011). According to it, Facebook was founded in February 2004 and is a social utility that helps people to communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and co-workers. The technologies facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone (over the age of 13) can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment. Facebook is made up of core site functions and applications such as a person's home page and profile. The home page includes news feed that is a personalized feed of her/his friends' updates. The profile displays information about the individual s/he has chosen to share, including interests, education and work background and contact information. Facebook also includes core applications –

⁴ Source for the user figures Wikipedia 2011 Accessed 24 June 2011
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites#cite_note-autogenerated1-123 – with all the relevant references checked the same day from the original (given) sources.

photos, events, videos, groups, and pages. Additionally, people can communicate with one another through chat, personal messages, wall posts, pokes, or status updates.

Whether Facebook truly is a 'trusted environment' has been debated hotly with the increasing commercialization of the site that has left the users with more and more of their personal data in the hands of advertisers, but the fact remains that the site is extremely popular. The growth of Facebook has been explosive, at the end of its first year, 2004 there were one million users, and at the time of my study was conducted 2010-2011, there were between 350 and 640 million active users. See the chart below for annual figures.



Source: Facebook 2011

In 2011 there are over 640 million active users (active defined as having logged on to Facebook within the past 30 days) and 50% of the active users log on to Facebook in any given day. The average user has 130 friends, is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events and creates 90 pieces of content each month. (Facebook 2011)

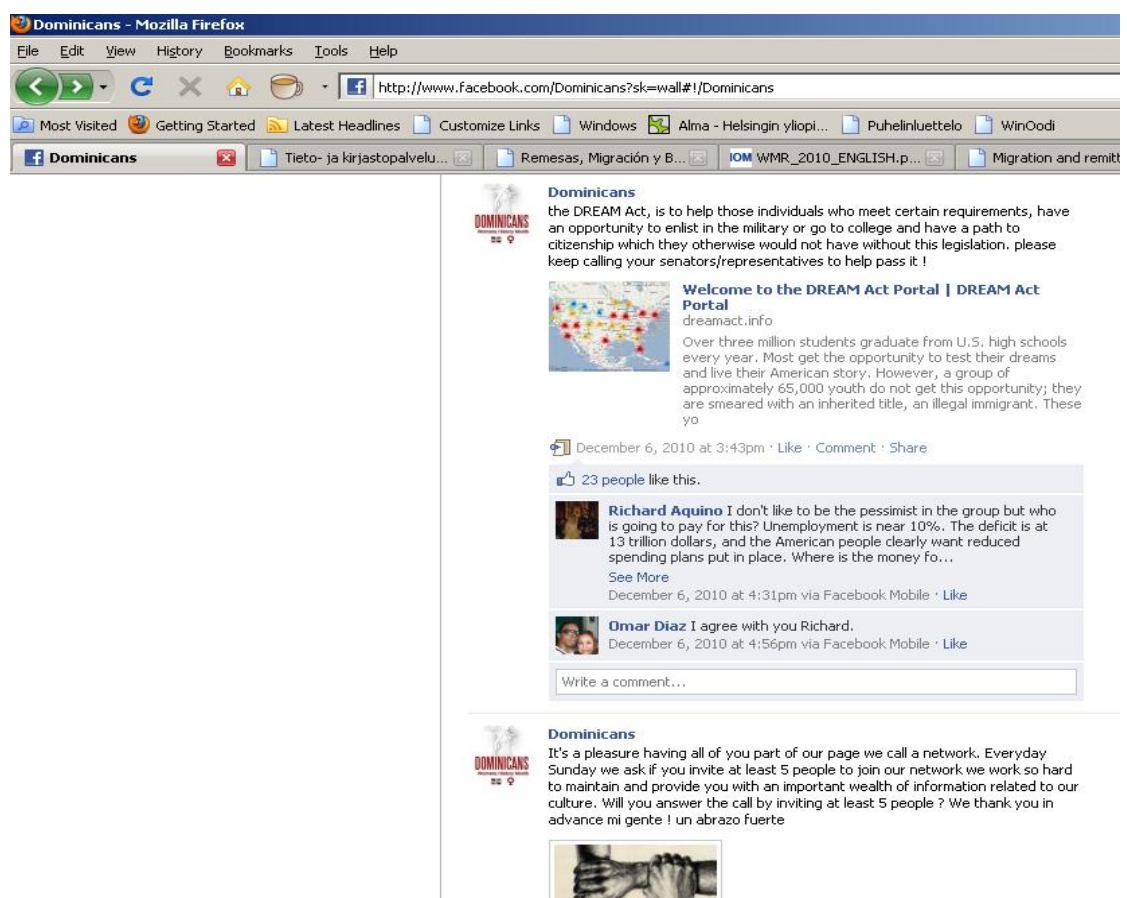
According to Laitinen (2003, 360), most of the information online is public and open to all, yet at the same time often anonymous and impersonal. In the case of Facebook, this is not completely accurate. Facebook as a social network site is a good example of an actor-based forum where the users are present. Most members are registered with

their own names. Baym (1995, 155) concludes that the use of real names helps to create an intimate environment in which a good deal of self-disclosure can be voiced. Castells (2001, 118-119) and Wellman & Gulia (1999, 353) establish that online identities in most online interaction are not role plays or impersonal communication but are in fact shaped by 'real life' identities containing such aspects as gender, age, stage in the life cycle, cultural milieu and socio-economic status. This I found to be the case also with most users on the communities I study.

Jésus Martín-Barbero (2002, 639) maintains that the new media creates a space for individual recognition and a mix of new visual cyberculture and traditional oral cultures. Facebook by nature supports this kind of communication, enabling quick and short updates and offering friends a possibility to comment the updates and other posts. Attaching images or videos is made easy, and the profile picture of each user appears next to each post by that user. There is a possibility to insert links to sites outside Facebook such as newspaper articles, ads or videos on YouTube. For the reader, following the links is made very easy. I will be studying, not profiles of individual users, but community sites that users have created, that they maintain and keep alive by reading, posting and commenting actively on common topical and interesting themes.



Screen capture from Dominicans in New York 5 Nov 2010



Screen capture from Dominicans 6 December 2010

Identity and community are central concepts in the context of transnational migration and online forums, in this case the Facebook, bring an additional feature to it. But in what way to find out how these concepts present themselves in the material examined? Next, I will explain the methods employed in data analysis.

3.5 Methodology and research data

I conducted a content analysis of the discussions on the sites I followed using a theory-guided analysis approach. I approached the research with the data as the starting point and the theory acted an instrument of analysis. The theory-guided research does not test an existing theory but tries to open new avenues of thought. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 96-97) Jouni Tuomi and Anneli Sarajärvi (ibid. 92-93) paraphrase Timo Laine's outline for content analysis. I have used this outline as my guiding tool when conducting my study. It goes as follows:

1. Decide what is interesting in this data and make a determined decision!
2.
 - a. Go through your data, distinguish and mark the parts that fall within your area of interest
 - b. Leave everything else out of the study!
 - c. Separate the marked parts from the rest of the data and gather it together
3. Classify your data by type, theme or category
4. Write your conclusions.

The outline above looks simple enough, but it proved to be challenging to follow. It was very difficult to define one's research area narrowly enough and to stick to the decision once it was made. There were a lot of interesting issues and potential topics for analysis in my material and I had to exclude many fascinating discussions. In the beginning, I went back and forth from the data to the research questions and theories and I kept redefining my themes to find what was truly relevant to answer the research questions I had posed. As I like to operate with a larger set of sub-questions seeking to answer the main research question, I sometimes rewrote some of these sub-questions to make them correspond better with the material at hand.

Recognizing the relevant discussions was easier once the first step was taken and I was able to stick to my decision. Codifying the data can be understood as notes that help the researcher to structure the material and act as a test instrument of the analysis that follows this step (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 93-99). Codifying and classifying the data was interesting while not always simple. I chose to look at the discussions from two viewpoints, that of transnational activities as community and identity markers and that of typical characteristics of virtual communities in order to better understand the limitations and potential offered by transnational social network communities.

I used the questions of Wellman & Gulia (1999) presented in section 3.4.3 related to the quality of online relationships, reciprocity, attachment, diversity and the effects on face-to-face communication to analyse the virtual community aspects of the groups I studied. I also employed the ideas of Sveningsson (2001) and Kollock & Smith (1999) in analyzing the boundaries and social order in the communities. The transnational activities I divided into four themes also employed by Itzigsohn & al 1999 with transnational identity issues included in the social and cultural practices. This was challenging as the discussions did not necessarily always fit nicely into just one thematic group, but related to several thematic issues and could therefore fall into more than one category. In the analysis, the theories were brought in to guide the process and to act as a starting point for the reporting as advised by Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, 93-99).

3.6 Research on the internet, research ethics and my role as a researcher

Laitinen (2003) discusses research on the internet. According to her, fieldwork online is examining structures of culture by, for example, gathering messages and analyzing texts. She argues that the internet is an actor-based forum and as such, not merely a producer of various texts, but a forum where interactive relationships exist, and true sense of community can be experienced. (Ibid. 357-361)

Additional good advice on qualitative research online was offered by Baym (2009, 180-188). She suggests that qualitative research should be focused, connected to history,

practical in the sense that the researcher should base the project on realistic foundation and not have impractical expectations or requirements. Furthermore, good qualitative research develops compelling explanations and anticipates counter-arguments and prepares for them by 1) problematizing the core concepts in use, 2) listening to participants, paying attention to how they see or understand themselves and the discussions under study; 3-4) attending to context and to oneself by being reflective, 5) seeking contrast in the data, 6) limiting ones claims, 7) documenting the research process and lastly 8) framing the study for diverse readers. Baym (2009, 188) also reminds that categorizations are not research ends in themselves but evidence of an underlying social logic that organizes social phenomena.

3.6.1 Research ethics

The issue of ethics when using data openly available online is a complicated one. Is the data that is available to all online public or private and can it be used without informed consent? Malin Sveningsson Elm (2009, 80-85) argues that private-public should not be seen as a mutually exclusive dichotomy but as a continuum, in which both context and content should be considered. In Finland the process of drafting guidelines for ethical research in social sciences is on-going and the more general Guidelines for Research Ethics from 2002⁵ do not address the issue of openly available data. In the guidelines of the Swedish Council for Research in Humanities and Social Sciences (Vetenskapsrådet 1990) the first requirement is that of individual protection, so that no one is harmed physically or mentally, humiliated or offended. That seems to be a good starting point for any research. Unfortunately these guidelines are so old that they do not discuss online information. According to more recent ethics guidelines specifically for internet research by the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social sciences and the Humanities (NESH 2003), "information that one counts as public can freely be used for research purposes". The guidelines continue "Even though information communicated in an open forum is of a private character, a researcher will – as a first rule - freely be able to use that information for research purposes." However, the researcher should carefully take into account the considerations of sensitive data. This should be done, for example, by anonymizing

⁵ The Guidelines are available also in English at <http://www.aka.fi/Tiedostot/Tiedostot/Julkaisut/Suomen%20Akatemian%20eettiset%20ohjeet%202003.pdf>

sensitive data and by avoiding the use of direct quotes in sensitive issues as the digital form of the data makes tracing informants' identities easier. (Ibid.)

I also tried to find guidelines or codes of conduct for research in Facebook's own legal terms. Unfortunately, in those the word research is not mentioned at all.⁶ I was able to find guidelines for market and social research in the social media by International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and ESOMAR (an organisation for market research). The guidelines emphasize the need to ensure no harm. Primary method for this is to depersonalise the data obtained from public social media, under which definition my material falls. It further suggests masking data on sensitive or illegal issues, embarrassing contents, personally identifiable information or if abusive language is being used. (ICC/ESOMAR 2011) I have attempted to do this in my analysis.

As I wanted to avoid any influence that the presence of a researcher on these sites might have on the content and participation in the discussions, I chose not to inform of my study beforehand and to not participate on the discussions myself. I gathered my data from sites that are open to all, without access limitations (although a registration to Facebook is required to be able to access the information). That means that the context is public or at least semi-public, which according to Sveningsson Elm (2009, 85) is required if one wants to study an environment without informed consent. Also all the content on the sites I studied was at the time of my study declared in the information page of each group to be open to public. However, in order to comply with the guideline to not harm, humiliate or offend anyone, also the sensitivity of the content must be considered. Most of discussions have no sensitive content, yet as some of the opinions voiced and issues discussed can be considered sensitive in certain contexts, I do not bring up the names of the participants and do not use direct quotes (apart from posts from the facilitators of the sites) in such cases to make tracing the identities more difficult in accordance with the NESH guidelines. I did not follow any individual's opinions, instead I concentrated on the discussions as a whole, as community and identity creating activity.

⁶ <http://www.facebook.com/legal/terms> Accessed 29 Feb, 2012.

The role I chose to take in these groups is that of a 'lurker'⁷, that despite its somewhat forbidding name simply refers to someone who is registered, reads the posts on the sites but does not participate in the discussions. In the sites I examined, this role was perhaps the most common of all. There were many members that participated regularly and actively in the discussions, some that participated on certain topics and others that commented on a random basis, but depending on the size of the member base there were tens or even hundreds of members that never posted a single comment. Yet, that does not mean that they have not followed the discussions and postings on the sites faithfully, and they too have a role in these communities.

Having discussed the central concepts and tools as well as methods employed, I will now turn to introducing the communities studied and describing the data found on these sites. This will be followed by an analysis of the texts linking back to the theories and concepts just presented.

⁷ Definition of a lurker can be found among others in Merriam-Webster dictionary <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lurker>

4 Dominican migrants' virtual communities

In this chapter, I will first introduce the groups I studied and explain how I selected them. Then I will take a look at the participants of the groups. That will be followed by the analysis of the data in the framework of economic, political, social and cultural practices. Lastly, the groups will be examined through the characteristics of a virtual community.

4.1 Introduction of the forums examined

I have examined the discussions on five Facebook forums for Dominicans abroad or pages that are intended for both Dominicans in the Dominican Republic as well as outside. These include *Dominicans*, *Dominicans in New York*, *Donde Estan Los Dominicanos de Faceook*, *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* and *Dominicans in Philadelphia*. At the time I started my research, these groups were all relatively new, most of them only established around the beginning of 2010. They were experiencing rapid membership growth and most sites reported very high levels of activity. Part of this activeness may have been due to the newness and therefore I decided to examine the discussion on these sites for the entire year of 2010. This gave an indication as to whether the groups had a more continuous flow of discussion and would have a possibility to become a more permanent platform of communication to the migrants. This also enabled me to avoid a short-term approach that Adams Parham (2004, 204) warns against. He comments that researchers often observe activities online for short periods of time creating what he calls static snapshots of online interactions. Also Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004, 1012-13) point out, that this type of research misses many ways of periodical engagement with the old home country, for example, during election cycles, family or ritual events or climatic catastrophes. During the time I followed, the sites had examples of all of the above-mentioned periodical events.

By the beginning of 2011 these groups had developed in varying degrees in size and activity: *Dominicans* had by the far largest number of members (24 313) and most activity. It is a site run by MiBodega Agency, that describes itself as the only urban intelligence agency in the world and whose mission is to inspire, educate and empower

young urban adults. It was clearly the most professionally facilitated site in my study. There were four facilitators that promised to introduce themselves after the group reached 4 000 members, which it did on February 27th, the Dominican independence day. The facilitators are young, all of them either college graduates with degrees in media or information studies or professionals with extensive experience in the media industries. They really used much time and energy to make the site an active community. They posted often, several times a day, on a wide array of topics including politics, media, Dominican and US current events, information on famous or historically significant Dominicans and Dominican-Americans, sports, music, and so on. They also posed a lot of questions varying from plans for the day to opinions on ethnicity and race that could result in active, complex and often very intelligent and knowledgeable discussions. The facilitators commented and participated on the on-going discussions and invited members with insightful observations to contribute more regularly. Unlike the other sites, *Dominicans* had a clear mission statement and a comment policy explaining the rules of conduct on the site. The *Dominicans* also invited its members to recruit five new members every Sunday in order to expand the network. This post always prompted positive replies and the site continued to grow rapidly throughout the year. They made inviting new members and thus expanding the network via existing Facebook connections extremely simple by creating an “invite Dominicans” box, through which members could simply by clicking it easily send invitations to join the group.

Second-largest group was *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* [Where are the Dominicans of Facebook] with 4 155 members, but the site was not very active. It is facilitated by a Dominican high-school student in Santo Domingo unlike the rest of the sites that were facilitated from the US. Third-largest and second-most active was *Dominicans in New York* with 4 069 members. There is no information available as to who has founded and facilitates the page and for what purpose. The two other local groups *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* [Dominicans in Miami and USA] and *Dominicans in Philadelphia* were clearly smaller with 775 and 497 members respectively. The group in Miami was facilitated by a local Dominican singer-songwriter that several of the groups’ members seemed to know personally. The facilitator of the Philadelphia site

never introduced her/himself. Three of the groups appeared on Facebook in late 2009. *Dominicans in Philadelphia* and *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* are the most recent groups in my study, both were established in March 2010. The later start can partially explain the smaller size and fewer posts of the Philadelphia group when compared with the two other local groups; although I believe that the relatively inactive facilitator has a greater impact on the slow growth and the lower level of activity in the group.

The amount of data varies a lot from site to site. *Dominicans in Philadelphia* had only 19 pages⁸ of data and *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* had 32 pages, *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* had 59 pages, *Dominicans in New York* 123 pages while the largest and most active group, *Dominicans* had over 500 pages of material.

4.2 Data selection process

I started my selection process in April 2010 by searching in the Facebook for groups or pages that contained the word 'Dominican' or 'Dominicanos' in the Spanish form. I tried searching for groups which contained names of some cities or provinces of the Dominican Republic but as this seemed to produce no results for active migrants' groups I abandoned this search. I also searched with the word 'Quisqueya', which is a Taíno word for the island of Hispaniola often still used by Dominicans.⁹ However, this lead to only a few company and sports sites and no active groups were found. With *Dominicans* and *Dominicanos* I managed to find around 25 sites. Several of these sites turned out to lead to company sites which I excluded. Next I looked at the number of participants and excluded all those that at the time had less than 50 participants, which meant a great majority of the sites. This way I had only six groups left. At first I followed all of them, but in June 2010 I decided to abandon the one called *I love*

⁸ The data was collected from the Facebook sites and copied to word documents in order to make sure that even if a site is closed or altered during the research period, the data remains available. To make the files smaller and thus more manageable, all profile photos of the members (that appear in connection to every post and comment) were removed. The remaining data consists of pictures, links, videos, posts and comments. The main emphasis of the analysis is concentrated on the textual material available, photos and videos are commented on only when they bring forth something that cannot be detected in the texts.

⁹ The Taíno is a collective name of the people living in the Caribbean islands in pre-Columbian time. Prior to Columbus's arrival, the island of Hispaniola was known by two alternative names: Haiti (Land of Mountains) or Quisqueya (Mother of all lands). (Higman 2011, 33)

Dominican Republic even though it was by far the largest group as it turned out to be a site frequented mostly by foreign tourists and not so much by migrants or Dominicans.

I also examined the possibility to add some sites outside Facebook such as the MiBodega Agency, or another social networking site called Hi5 and that is popular especially in many Latin American countries. However, as the dynamics of MiBodega are quite different from Facebook, and more importantly the *Dominicans* group in Facebook turned out to be a forum maintained by MiBodega, I chose to exclude it as a separate object. As for Hi5, I examined a few of the most popular Dominican-related groups there. However, their membership numbers were much smaller; the activity on the sites slower than in Facebook and the type of discussion was very similar to the Facebook groups I was already following. Therefore, I chose to concentrate on the media I myself have previous understanding of, having been an active user of Facebook since 2007.

4.3 Participants

Who participated in the groups I studied? This was not as easy to find out as I thought it would be when I started my research due to changes in Facebook features during my data collection period. Even if I refer to all the sites I examine as groups, they define themselves in Facebook terminology in differing terms: there are two society/culture sites, one community, one local business and only one open group/common interest site. At the time I started collecting my data this made no difference, features for all were the same. Joining all the sites could be done easily by clicking the like-button on the front page. Also one could browse the lists of all members and click oneself further to these members' own public profiles in the Facebook. I had planned to do this to a small sample to get background information (age, gender, location) of the members of the different groups. However, by the time I had gathered all data this had changed. For sites other than groups, one could no longer see who else participates. Only the one site that defined itself as a group still had a list of members. To join this type of a group, one now has to request permission from the facilitator. From the point of view of privacy this is positive development, which I welcome. Yet, it lead to the fact that I had to abandon my idea of sample of all sites but one and instead find user

information in the data still available to me: the discussions on the sites. However, as there are several discussions about relevant themes such as the current location, place of origin and first language available on some of the forums, it is not completely impossible to form some kind of a general picture of the members. This can be seen as a more ethical way of gathering background data: only information that the participants have willingly shared in an open forum discussion was used. From a statistical viewpoint there are at least two differences compared to the sample model: first, all information is based on only active users – if one has not posted on the site or answered the polls posted there then there is no information available. The second issue is that as I was restricted to only those polls and information available on each site that varies from site to site, I cannot draw many comparisons between the sites. By using the information available on the sites along with research available on internet users, I will now try to give an image of the participants.

The one group where I could still access the member list was *Dominicanos en Miami y USA*. I pulled a 25% sample of all users. 35% of the members were female, while 55% were male and the remaining 10% were institutions, such as, for example, Latinos del Mundo and Centro Español or local businesses. This site seemed to have more institutional members than the others that I studied and these institutional members were fairly active especially in promoting cultural events. The users were predominantly young adults, the majority were between the ages of 20 to 35 and nearly everyone resided in Florida.

Dominicans was the site most active in posting different kinds of polls. For example, there was a picture of the Dominican passport with a question “Do you have one?” 52% of the respondents said they hold a Dominican passport, while 44% said that they only have the US passport. 4% said that they have both. This corresponds fairly well with the information of the Census Bureau presented in chapter 2.3, according to which 70% of Dominican-Americans have US citizenship. According to this poll, there seems to be a slight over-representation of Dominican citizens; however the sample size was too small to hold any statistical significance. Another poll enquired where in the Dominican Republic the members are from and this poll was also repeated. On the

first poll in January there were 73 replies naming 27 places with 29% coming from the capital, 16% from Santiago de los Caballeros, 52% from other towns and communities and 3% naming a place in the US. When the poll was repeated in June, there were altogether 133 replies naming 20 different cities and communities, a great majority coming from the two largest cities - 27% from Santiago and 26% the capital Santo Domingo. There were five other communities with more than five replies each and another four with more than one reply. Roughly half of the respondents listed two locations to mark the origin of their parents as they themselves had been born in the United States. The results indicate that a large part of the members are second-generation migrants. This also seems to support the notion that modern-day Dominican migration is an urban phenomenon. *Dominicans* also asked its members when was the last time they visited home (Dominican Republic): 29% of the respondents visited it within the past year, 22% one to two years ago, 20% two to five years ago and 29% over five years ago. 14% also tell about their plans to visit home in the near future. This implies that the actual movement across borders maybe limited but the members nevertheless identify with the Dominican national identity thus supporting Levitt & Nyberg Sørensen's classification of *belonging* rather than *being*. There was a poll in April asking where the members currently live. There were 49 replies with half from New York State. The rest came from ten other states in the US, Canada and France. Only two of the respondents were currently living in the Dominican Republic. Same poll repeated in May resulted in 157 replies, with 30% from New York, 18% from Florida and 8% from New Jersey. Altogether 26 US States located on both coasts were listed, as well as Hawaii and Alaska. Only four respondents came from other countries (Denmark and Canada) and none from the Dominican Republic. In August the poll resulted in 114 replies, with 39% from New York State, 20% from Florida and 9% from Massachusetts (mainly Boston). Altogether 17 states were named along with two replies from the Dominican Republic, one from U.S. Virgin Islands and one from Germany. Also *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* posted some information on its members. Once the facilitator posted a list of most active countries on the network, listing the US, the Dominican Republic, Spain, Dutch Caribbean, Canada, and Puerto Rico. This also encouraged members from other countries, such as Italy and Sweden to announce their presence.

The responses show that the members of the site come from very varied backgrounds, and are in different situations in life. They live in areas with both high and low concentrations of Dominicans and other Latino immigrants and they have linkages with the Dominican Republic in varying degrees.

Unsurprisingly, most of the participants in the sites I examined came from the United States. This can be explained by the fact that an overwhelming majority of Dominican migrants reside in the US. Other possible explanations are the fact that three of the five groups were groups concentrated on US cities of New York, Miami and Philadelphia and that the language on *Dominicans*, the largest group that was not geographically limited was English, potentially deterring participants from other countries, particularly from the Dominican Republic and Spain. During my original search in the spring of 2010, I did not succeed in finding an active community of Dominicans in Spain in the Facebook, even though Spain is the second-most common migration destination for Dominicans. As I repeated the search in March 2011, there were several small (20-400 members) recently established communities and some occupational communities such as Dominican doctors or students in Spain. However, I decided not to take any new empirical data at that point of my study, thus the concentration on the US-Dominican migrant communities. As became evident above, there is a small number of participants from other countries especially in the largest *Dominicans* group, but the overwhelming majority resides in the US. Also to issues discussed centre around Dominican Republic and the US.

Did all Dominican-Americans have equal access to these groups? A study by US Department of Commerce (2010) found that Hispanics are the ethnic group with least access and use of the internet at home in the US. According to the study, only 39.7% of Hispanics (29.4% living in rural areas) have broadband access at home compared with 67.3% Asian non-Hispanics. Of course accessing the internet is possible via dial-up (4.7%) or also elsewhere, such as at school or work (although those employed have broadband more often than those unemployed or not in the workforce), in internet cafés and other locations outside homes. Yet the fact remains that Hispanics are the

ethnic group with least access to the internet in the US, so it should be remembered that the new transnational social network sites are not equally accessible to all.

According to Benítez (2006, 193), the knowledge of English is a central consideration of the digital divide, since most sites are only available in English. The Facebook, however, has a Spanish-language version so to use Facebook one does not have to know English. Yet, for considering the digital divide in this study, it is the language used in the groups I examined that is important and not the language one otherwise uses in Facebook. In three of the five groups (*Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook and Dominicanos en Miami y USA*), the main language was Spanish. Even on the two other sites, there were plenty of posts also in Spanish and members sometimes post their comments in Spanish even though the discussion on the topic otherwise might be in English. In order to be able to participate in the two most active groups, understanding and for most parts also writing English was essential whereas the other three required good understanding of Spanish and the Dominican dialect. Choosing the Spanish language is clearly beneficial to *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook*, for when members are asked whether they speak "*Un poco de English*", several members say that they speak a little or that while speaking is easy, writing it is difficult or that they simply prefer Spanish to English. To enable highest levels of activity on the sites a good working knowledge of both languages ensured understanding of all posts. *Dominicans* posted a poll asking what was the first language of the members. There were 75 replies, out of which a great majority, 75% named Spanish, 16% distinctly mentioning Spanish spoken in the Dominican Republic. Only 8% had English as a first language, while 12% named Spanglish, a mix between Spanish and English. Two members also named Chinese and one Italian as their first language.

The digital divide in diasporic communities does not reflect merely language skills but also income/wealth, gender, education, generation, legal status and geographical location affect the access to the internet (Benítez 2006, 185). As is to be expected, people with legal status and higher income, younger people and people living in urban areas have better access to the internet than poorer, older people and people living in rural areas. The members in my data have varied backgrounds, but with a clear bias

towards the younger, urban and educated. Interestingly enough, according to the study by US Department of Commerce (2010) gender did no longer seem to make any difference among the general population (59.3% male vs. 59% female of the population). Whether or not this is true also among immigrants was not clear, however, based on the sample on *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* the gender gap still seems to have some relevance among the users on my groups.

There was less participation from the Dominican Republic in my groups than I had presumed when starting my study and therefore less diaspora-home country interaction. A partial explanation is that internet usage is not as widespread in the DR as among the migrants. According to UNDP (2010) 21.6% of the Dominican population use the internet. Another possible explanation is that contacts to homeland are often direct family contacts, via telephone, chat, e-mails or in the Facebook on the personal profile page. There is not as much need to maintain contact with one's own family and friends or to create new connections to the home country via Facebook communities. Nor do the Dominicans living in the Dominican Republic have a need to assert or justify their Dominican identity in online groups in the same way that many Dominican migrants have. Most communication was in other words within the diaspora. However, updates and discussions relating to news on the Dominican Republic were frequent.

4.4 *Economic practices*

4.4.1 *Remittances and philanthropy*

Perhaps the most common economic transnational practice among migrants and certainly the one with most economic effect are remittances. Facebook is not a channel for this and the issue was not much discussed on the forums I studied. I found only a couple of remarks on the topic, both on *Dominicans* site. One was related to politics and corruption:

"...We can't be bought so easily ... It is Dominicans living abroad that send money to DR, when we barely have enough for us. It's us who hear the cries of family when they are sick and can't pay the doctors. It's our parents who left to make a better life for us..."

The comment further suggested that by sending remittances the migrants gain the right to influence the home country politics as the people living back home were

incapable of doing so. Another comment related to remittances appears as a response to the facilitator's poll on:

"What is the one thing that prevents or continues to make it hard for our people to move forward in our communities?"

One member felt that the demands from family members back home to keep sending them money was the thing that most hindered migrants upwards mobility in the society.

On a topic related to remittances, philanthropy in the form of donations to children in the Dominican Republic received some attention. There was, for example, a discussion on the fact that there are many Dominican children on the "Sponsor a Child" websites and this raised some discussion. In 2010 however, the issue of donations gained most attention in connection with neighbouring Haiti, due to the devastating earthquake.¹⁰ On *Dominicans in New York* the donations were directed to the UN, Red Cross, CNN, Wyclef Jean's Yele foundation and UNICEF and many members agree to send money. The members expressed pride on Dominican Republic having been the first nation to offer assistance to Haiti which was also noted on the *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* site. The latter site requested donations with a general plea for assistance and then advertised a local concert of Dominican artists in support of Haiti. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* someone saw the earthquake as a business opportunity and promoted 'survival packages' that one could buy for family members back in the Dominican Republic mere hours after the earthquake.

4.4.2 Transnational enterprises

Itzigsohn et al (1999, 325-328) discuss the role of transnational businesses as migrants' transnational economic practice. They identify most of these businesses being in the service and retail sectors. In my data I found evidence of these businesses even though

¹⁰ A devastating earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 struck Haiti on January 12, 2010. The epicenter was near the town of Léogâne, approximately 25 km west of the capital Port-au-Prince. An estimated three million people were affected by the quake; the Haitian government reported that an estimated 316,000 people had died, 300,000 had been injured and 1,000,000 made homeless. International agencies have suggested that the death toll is much lower at somewhere between 46,000 and 220,000, with around 1.5 million to 1.8 million homeless. (Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Haiti_earthquake Accessed 21 Nov 2011) No matter what the actual tolls are, the effects of the earthquake were catastrophic and caused worldwide pleas for solidarity and assistance.

at the time of my study none of the forums offered a separate arena for advertising, even if one site (*Dominicans*) promised that such a forum for Dominican and Dominican-American businesses was forthcoming. *Dominicans* was also the only site forbidding ads to be posted and the instructions said that any ads would be removed. There were also clearly least ads on that site, even though especially ads on cultural events and productions were not categorically removed. On all of the sites examined there were ads related to cheap international phone calls, which are important for maintaining transnational friendships and family ties. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* there were ads promoting local services, for example, photography, Latino restaurants, Spanish-speaking beauty services and notary public services. Also local cultural events such as concerts, dances and book launches were heavily promoted, not only Dominican but also other Latino events. It was not just service business enterprises that advertised: there was a company posting ads on several of the sites selling Dominican-inspired apparel and other items and a US car dealer specialised on car sales to the Latin American markets. A post on *Dominicans* advertised a Dominican-owned IT-company emphasising the fact that they operate in the Dominican Republic as well as employ Dominicans in the US.

Transnational businesses were not visible only through advertisements, but also through posts on trying to find nostalgic export products or typical Dominican products or services. For example, on *Dominicans in Philadelphia* someone recently relocated to the city asked for hints for Dominican bakeries in town.

4.4.3 *Diasporic tourism*

Diasporic tourism was an area that raised interest in the groups studied. In most sites there were several postings of Dominican beaches and other tourist attractions and these always prompted many admiring and longing comments on the beauty of the beloved home country, very typical comments being “Que viva la Quisqueya bella” and “Mi Bella Quisqueya”. Sometimes people also commented when they were next going to travel ‘back home’ or when they had last been there. There was a poll on *Dominicans* asking the members where they had been on their latest vacation. Nearly 70% of the people that answered had been to the Dominican Republic on their last

vacation, around 20% had travelled in the US and the rest had gone somewhere else. The results of the poll suggest that visits back home still seem to be the number one choice of a holiday destination indicating close connections to the island. However, as was apparent on the other poll asking of the time of latest visit back home not nearly everyone can afford the trip every year, even if they would want to.

Travel agencies advertised on several of the sites I studied: they offered, for example, deals on flights from New York to Puerto Plata (*Dominicans in New York*), from Santo Domingo to Madrid (*Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook*) or on a more general level on cheap flights from the US to the Dominican Republic (*Dominicanos en Miami y USA*). On *Dominicans in New York* and on *Dominicans* there were also advertisements for an event planner in Puerto Plata and Cabarete encouraging people to have their weddings in the Dominican Republic. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* there were posts promoting Dominican hotels. On *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* there were travel ads on trips within the Dominican Republic, for example, weekend trips from the capital to Punta Cana or Puerto Plata, both popular beach resorts. These ads were aimed at both Dominicans residing permanently in the Dominican Republic but also migrants visiting home.

Dominicans published news items related to the Dominican government's plans to boost the travel industry in the country. There were plans to attract private airplane tourism, something that is unlikely to target many Dominican migrants. Another item was that the country's tourism official invited everyone to help improve Dominican Republic's role as a tourism destination. Neither of the topics directly affects diasporic tourism but they contribute to keeping home country travel on the agenda for the members and remind them that tourism is most important economic sector in the country.

4.4.4 *Home country investments*

Investing in the home country is another example of broad transnationalism. Investing in a house or a business for eventual retirement in the home country are actions caused by the desire to return. Such practices have also symbolic meaning sustaining

the emotional linkage between the old home country and the migrant; they strengthen the Dominican identity of the migrants. (Itzigsohn et al 1999, 325-328) In my data there was relatively little discussion on this issue. There was an ad on *Dominicans in New York* with information on building of luxury apartments in Boca Chica, a small town with a well-known beach resort close to Santo Domingo. There was also a comment on the occasion of opening the first IKEA store in the country, something that was also noted on *Dominicans*. On *Dominicans in Philadelphia* there was an ad for a Dominican car dealer that also sells cars to migrants in the Dominican Republic online. On *Dominicans* the facilitator and the MiBodega agency behind the site were often seen as experts in Dominican and Dominican-American issues and members turned to them with concerns relating to different aspects in their transnational existence. An example related to investments in the Dominican Republic is a member that requested advice from the owner of the site in connection to a land feud that her family was involved in back on the island. The discussion continued via e-mail so I do not know whether the member in fact received help but the online community was experienced by the member as such that you can turn to when in need of assistance.

4.4.5 *Economic nostalgia and cultural-economic linkages*

Another way of bringing up economic interests on the sites was nostalgia photos and reminiscent discussions on popular Dominican brands or businesses. They help to maintain Dominican brand awareness among migrants and thus influence nostalgic exports and migrant retail businesses. The facilitator of *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* posted several 'nostalgic' ads¹¹ with photos and videos of the most popular beer brand in the Dominican Republic called Presidente. On *Dominicans in New York*, there were nostalgic photos and discussions on local Dominican-style corner stores or bodegas as they are called in New York and colmados as they are known in the Dominican Republic. Around twenty members engaged in a lively discussion on the strangest thing they've purchased at them. These discussions serve not only as an example of transnational economic practices but are also a way of 'sharing the mundane' that is important for the survival of a virtual community and that will be discussed in following chapters.

¹¹ Ad is used as a short form of advertisement

An example on posts that combine cultural transnationalism and economic practices with activities in the diaspora community was an ad for Dominican musical services offered to the local diaspora community by migrant musicians. This ad was posted by a member of *Dominicans en Miami y USA*, who was also a member of the band advertised. As mentioned earlier, the facilitator of the site was a local Dominican singer-songwriter which perhaps explains the fact that the posts on that site contained more ads and promotions in general and on local diaspora cultural events and culture enterprises in particular than did any other group examined. The facilitator most likely had close links to the local cultural diaspora community. Also on *Dominicans in Philadelphia* a local Dominican-owned nightclub and its events were advertised. *Dominicans in New York* recommended a Jazz Club in Santiago, DR, and linked directly to its home pages. *Dominicans* that otherwise banned advertising from its posts, allowed ads on ticket sales to concerts with Dominican music and promotions of Dominican films and music videos. They also offered to post Dominican or Latino-related cultural events on their separate events list that allowed the members to see local events and RSVP to them.

4.4.6 *Transnational labour market*

Immigrants are often at the bottom of the labour market in low-paid occupations and are subject to widespread discrimination and their differing cultural characteristics and lacking language skills hinder integration. Portes (2001, 188) notes that transnationalism offers a viable alternative to this by bypassing both labour market constraints and cultural prejudice. Transnational enterprises empower by offering employment. Also online communities can play a role in offering information on employment and even employment opportunities. *Dominicans* is an excellent example of this. The MiBodega agency that runs the site, recruited contributors via Facebook welcoming applications nationwide from journalists, photographers and vj's online. Even if the positions offered are at least initially unpaid internships, they did give the interns work experience that corresponds with their education, something that often proves difficult for immigrants. These posts prompted a lot of positive responses and some members on related fields such as a graphic designer volunteered to contribute,

so there is a clear demand for this type of opportunities. On the same site, there was also an interesting discussion that was prompted by a member that answered a routine “What are you doing ahora” [now] question posted by the facilitator. She said that she is looking for work and asks if anyone knows any openings in advertising, marketing or event promotions. Then she appeals to the other members by:

“Let’s see if one dominican can help another dominican” and adding a Dominican interjection “Ayudame manito” [help me little brother].

First, the facilitator picked up this thread of conversation and guided the member to contact employment agencies. Then also other members engaged the member, encouraged her by giving positive feedback on how these agencies are helpful in finding employment by offering concrete assistance and advised her where to turn to in order to find the nearest one. Perhaps inspired at least partially by that post the MiBodega agency added a couple of months later a jobs/employment section in co-operation with employment organisations to its homepages announcing the launch via Facebook *Dominicans* site. On the same site there was also a poll on the ‘biggest-named’ company that the members have worked for. This was an attempt to find out where the network’s members are in the job market. This post prompted a lot of comments. Many did not have any big names to offer, even though the job descriptions were very interesting and varied, but there were several people working for financial companies and banks, in the defence industry, in military service, in non-profit organisations, in health industry and in retail. The topic of the poll was interesting and offered an opportunity to openly strengthen the community by trying to build a map of the member network in the job market. Yet there was no sign of anyone pursuing this further at that time.

On *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* there was a post inviting people to join a private employment agency located in Santiago that is specialized in finding employment opportunities for Dominicans that want to work abroad. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* one can see traces of local-level diaspora co-operation. On one occasion a member of the group was looking for an employee through the facilitator, whom he seemed know personally and trust her.

4.5 *Political practices*

Membership and activism in a Dominican political party can be seen as an example of narrow political transnationalism, along with voting, when possible. As noted by Portes & al (2007) many Dominican migrants are very involved in the activities of home country political parties. Fundraising is the most important activity, but migrants also influence voting decisions of Dominicans on the island as they are often thought to be better informed. External voting has so far been possible only in presidential elections. Other interest in electoral politics such as political arguments or rallies or civic activism can be seen as a part of broad transnationalism. (Itzigsohn & al 1999, 328-330) In the discussions on the forums there were examples of both narrow as well as broad transnationalism.

Bernal (2006, 163) in his study of Eritreans online, found that migration and transnational practices aided by new technologies are transforming also political participation. The internet has a potential to change politics by, for example, giving voice to the views of people not in authoritative positions. It has fewer barriers to expression and there is not much censorship. (Ibid. 165-166) Whether or not political participation is in fact undergoing a transformation cannot be deduced from my data, but political migrants' interest in both Dominican and US politics is clearly visible from the discussions on the sites examined.

Also Latin American politics gained some attention on *Dominicans*. There was a post on an attempted coup in Ecuador. The facilitator that posted the link commented

"I know its not about DR but it is still big news..."

A member answered that it is good to learn about issues outside our 'comfort zone'. On another post on Venezuela and Colombia breaking diplomatic relations in July the captioning was similar. The members commented that this might affect Dominican Republic indirectly as they have close ties with both countries and buys a lot of oil from Venezuela and is therefore dependent on the country. Yet Latin America as a region at least in a political sense attracts very little attention.

4.5.1 *Dominican politics*

There were legislative elections held in the Dominican Republic on 16 May, 2010 in which representatives to Senate and House of Deputies as well as several local positions such as mayors, city councils and so on were elected. In the elections 26 parties had candidates but only three parties PLD (Partido de la Liberación Dominicana), PRD (Partido Revolucionario Dominicano) and PRSC (Partido Reformista Social Cristiano) succeeded in getting enough votes to secure seats in the senate and the house of deputies.¹² The next presidential elections are to be held in 2012.

4.5.1.1 *Dominican party politics and voting*

Dominicans commented on the election season in the DR inviting members to post their thoughts on the subject. Few members chose to openly post their party allegiance, mostly PLD or PRD but a clear majority of the comments claimed that since all the politicians are corrupt, they don't really care who wins and some indicated that they will not be voting at all. According to the electoral law, the external voting was at least at that time limited to presidential elections, so in fact only if the person still held a Dominican Cedula [identity card] and was visiting the country during the election period, would s/he have been able to vote.¹³ On other posts there was a discussion related to a newspaper article, according to which the president was travelling around the country to build up support to his party PLD in the elections. While some claimed that this was wrong and the system and the politicians were all corrupt, few of the members pointed out that this is also common procedure in the US. This raised some objections again pointing out that no public money is spent for campaigning in the US. One member thought that things in DR were very bad and longingly described Trujillo era when the country was so safe that one could sleep with open doors and the economy was in a better shape. Surprisingly no one was provoked enough by this to comment.

¹² PLD received 42% of the votes, PRD 38% and PRSC 6%. The seats were divided as follows: Senate PLD 31/32 and PRSC 1/32. House of Deputies PLD 105/183, PRD 75/183 and PRSC 3/183. (Political Database of the Americas <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Elecdata/DomRep/leg10.html> Accessed 3 Dec, 2011).

¹³ See <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/americas/DO/republica-dominicana-compendio-electoral-2008/view> Accessed 7 Jan, 2012.

Dominicans posted an article that a former Miss Dominican Republic was campaigning to become a vice-mayor in the elections. Former beauty queens running for office are not uncommon, but this raised an interesting discussion that she should be judged on all her merits, not merely by the fact that she has first become famous through a pageant. This was followed by a discussion on whether the members think she was ready for such a post or not and whether she would just be a front or whether she would have some real influence as well. In another election-related post on *Dominicans* there was an article on the poor condition of the first University of the Americas located in Santo Domingo with a captioning:

"...This is why you HAVE to vote in the DR elections if possible, so that we can change this!!!"

Dominicans also posted the results from the elections commenting that for another six years the country would be controlled by a left-wing party. This however provoked a comment doubting whether PLD is in fact a left-wing party but the facilitator replied that it is the only left-wing that Dominican has and that the party has used leftist identity campaigning. This lead the doubter to conclude that only 3 members of the 30+ Senate coming from the opposition party cannot be good for democratic process or governance. The facilitator countered that it is how the people voted and that there has most likely been some voter fraud but even after the upcoming recount the leadership of the country would be in less-than capable hands.

I find it interesting that at the time that the results are posted there have not yet been claims on fraud or demands for recount but these are expected to take place nevertheless. The facilitator concluded his comment by a provoking thought:

"It is up to us abroad to try and go back and save DR from democratic disaster"

One member commented to this and agreed with the statement and encouraged people to get dual citizenship and to vote as the people abroad cannot be bought as easily as those living in the DR. He concluded by saying:

"Only United we will be victorious".

Dominicanos en Miami y USA only posted one comment on the elections in the Dominican Republic and that was an article from Listín Diario, Dominicans largest newspaper, on the price of the election that was estimated to reach two billion Dominican pesos, 52 million US dollars. *Dominicans in Philadelphia* did not have any posts related to the Dominican elections. In December the facilitator posted logos of the three parties that have deputies and senators in the Dominican congress and asked the members to show support to their parties but received no comments. *Donde estan los Dominicanos en Faceook* did not mention the elections at all.

Dominican politicians also campaign in the US. A presidential candidate visited New York in July 2010 and his public meeting was advertised on *Dominicans*. On the same site there was a comment by a member relating to the 2012 presidential elections. He had heard that there was possibility that the current president Leonel Fernandez would attempt to run again, even though he has pushed hard for a constitution that would make re-election unconstitutional¹⁴. Surprisingly enough this, and a biography of the president received relatively few comments, even from the opponents of his administration. However, the biography of the first lady provoked many rude and contemptuous comments calling the facilitators to be ashamed of themselves for posting it, and going on to blaming the government for being corrupt thieves and the president becoming a dictator and his party for silencing reporters with money, threats and violence. It went so far that some members reacted to this, calling the first commentators for envious haters and telling them to stop complaining and start doing something about it.

4.5.1.2 Distrusting the government – corruption, human rights violations and impunity

According to Levitt and Nyberg Sørensen (2004, 9) the vast majority of migrants distrust their government. Especially when political support is requested or financial resources are involved (remittances, investments, charitable donations), migrants may question issues such as corruption, political and legal reforms. They demand transparency and accountability from their government. (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003, 222) Corruption is a recurring theme on the forums I studied in discussions on

¹⁴ Fernandez is not running in the elections of 2012

homeland politics and society at large. There were dozens of examples of such posts and news reports, I will only bring up a few. Also, even if the initial topic of discussion may have been completely unrelated, the discussion often turned to corruption which was by many seen as the root of all evil in the Dominican Republic.

Dominicans posted Transparency International list of the most corrupt countries in the world where DR is number 101. While some considered this sad and saw a turn for worse during past few years, one member commented that she thought DR would rank higher and some commented that at least DR wasn't number one. On another post *Dominicans* facilitator linked to an article titled "Faced with proof of corruption, Dominican government eyes damage control". The introduction of the post was unusually enough in Spanish:

"...El gobierno esta robando mano sobre puño y si no hacemos algo por respect ya que esta en el aire somos tan culpables como ellos y no tenemos derecho a reclamar." [The government is robbing hand over fist and if we don't do anything now that it is in the open we are as guilty as they are and don't have a right to complain.]

Then he went on urging the members to write or call the UN Anti-Corruption Manager giving his phone number and e-mail address ending in English with

"We have the numbers, let's be the change we want to see."

This post received only a couple of comments one accusing the writer of the article of being a communist and the other claiming that Dominicans don't want to take action as they don't want to see the problem.

The corruption was also traced back in history in the posts by the facilitator of *Dominicans*. He posted a link to an article on the military coup in 1963 with the following introduction:

"Just a lil' FYI of the history of politics in DR. The coup was staged by wealthy businessmen and the church. I guess no one wants to lose power to democracy and wealth redistribution, go figure."

This prompted a discussion that starts with a comment saying that corruption in the Dominican Republic goes back further than most think. The next commentator continued by saying that the truly sad part is that there is no end in sight.

Corruption was often related to news on drug smuggling and criminals managing to avoid capture in the Dominican Republic. Among others the Dominican Civil Aviation Institute, the police, customs officials and military officials were accused of accepting bribes or for other forms of fraud.

Corruption was discussed in conjunction with many and varied issues, among others aid to Haitian earthquake victims. In *Dominicans in New York* there's a post on how Dominican authorities impounded stolen food aid intended for Haiti in a Dominican border town. This led to comments, such as "they do this all the time". When one member claimed that Dominicans gave millions to Haiti, another member commented that the money was stolen by Dominicans and the culprits blamed Haiti for losing it. Discussion in *Dominicans* on sponsoring a Dominican child soon led to a call to end corruption in DR and to a statement according to which Dominicans living outside the country should do more to fight corruption.

Forms of 'legal corruption' were also debated. In *Dominicans* there was a post by a member claiming that a law mandates 50% of the national fiscal budget of the election year to political parties with a link to the newspaper article¹⁵ with a heading "Partidos políticos recibirán más de mil millones en 2010" [political parties will get over a billion pesos in 2010]. There were not many comments but the facilitator commented saying that he found this surprising. The claim did appear rather unbelievable and as one read the article it became clear that the member who posted the news captioned it falsely. What the article in fact said was that according to the electoral law in an election year 0.5% of national income and non-election year 0.25% is to be directed to a fund that finances political parties. The sums still appear rather high; particularly since the 5% vote threshold required by the fund causes 80% of the money to be divided between the two largest parties. The money going to political parties received a lot of attention on *Dominicans* and public financial support to political parties was considered wasteful and seen as a form of condoned or legal corruption.

¹⁵ The article can be found at <http://listindiario.com/la-republica/2009/12/13/124864/Partidos-politicos-recibiran-mas-de-mil-millones-en-2010> accessed 12 Dec, 2011 This is also what the electoral law in fact does say, <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/americas/DO/republica-dominicana-compendio-electoral-2008/view> Accessed 7 Jan, 2012

On another post *Dominicans* commented on bonuses that the Deputies assigned themselves twice in six months. The concern of members of the parliament deciding on their own salaries is common to many countries, including Finland, and it often raises a public debate as also noted in one comment posted in response, but in Dominican Republic the members are apparently allowed to give themselves extra bonuses in addition to annual salary and other benefits. What both the facilitator and the members commenting seemed to find amusing was that the second bonus was assigned on mother's day, while only roughly 20% of the deputies are women.

In July *Dominicans* posted a link to a newspaper article on past excesses of the Dominican government and in its captioning they mentioned 54 million pesos used for toilet paper, 1 200 dollars hourly salary paid to an illiterate consultant, and party members getting salaries even though they were not employed by the government but by the (then) ruling party. This of course provoked many *ladrones* [thieves] comments and even a comment stating that the majority of the elections are bought.

There were a few posts with positive news related to corruption. There was a link to an article on how an NGO (The Dominican Alliance against Corruption) filed charges against 25 senators on the use of a slush fund. The link was captioned with

"Someone out there cares!"

Another potentially positive headline posted by the facilitator of *Dominicans* read

"Dominican President under mounting pressure to halt corruption"

Few comments said things like: *it is about time, someone has to do it or hope that it really happens*. However, several comments strongly suspected this would not happen, one even commenting that the president was

"el primer ladron" [the main thief].

The corruption overall in the discussions was seen something so inherent and so embedded in the system of government of the Dominican Republic that it would be difficult if not impossible to stop no matter who is in power.

Dominican government and justice system faced also other types of criticism than corruption, among others for human rights violations and for impunity. *Dominicans* posted a link to a news item on a case where a mother of a suspected killer was arrested in order to pressure the suspect to turn himself in. Before the link there was an introduction written by the facilitator of the site

"This is the type of human rights violations that the DR gov. has been carrying out for years. They are accusing someone of a crime without evidence, and if they cannot find them they take one of the parents or siblings into custody. Do you think this is a good strategy to fight crime? Or should the DR ministry of justice respect everyone's rights to be an individual and not hold anyone accountable for anyone else's doings"

The introduction was provocative and it got many responses, for example, expressions: *unfair, it's a way of life, ridiculous and lazy, crazy, lots of things that ain't right and the abuse of the people by the authorities*, were used to describe the situation. Some blamed the police but there was also a comment saying that most police officers are poor and uneducated, almost illiterate and continued that the politicians should be held responsible. On another example a former chief of police was charged with human rights violations, but before the verdict was given, the president interfered and then offered the man an advisory position in a ministry. Impunity and not enforcing the laws were according to one member the most important reasons why the Dominican Republic did not progress. Yet another example of a reported human rights violation discussed in *Dominicans* was a presenter shot by the police. There was great consensus that the act was abuse and a crime and that the policemen involved should be made responsible. Yet this was not considered a very likely event since they see the system so corrupt that they fully expected impunity. However, this particular event raised a movement of civic activism forcing action from the government, which will be discussed in section 4.5.3. There was a member commenting that the country needed another Trujillo before things would get better. This was already a second positive comment on Trujillo's time that did not provoke a response.

The former Dominican long-term dictator Trujillo did raise a couple of heated discussion on *Dominicans* during the year. The facilitator posted a short biography on him as they regularly do on famous Dominicans. Most comments condemned the man as cruel dictator some even comparing him to Hitler. There were a couple of

comments saying that yes he did kill many people, yet he was the only one that paid the external debt of the country commenting that after him the external debt has changed into eternal debt. Someone replies that he robbed the national assets. There is even a “*QUE VIVA TRUJILLO!!!*” post. One member stated that his environmental policies helped to maintain the country beautiful. One member reminded that the country has never been as safe as it was under his era and someone replied that this was because everyone was terrified of him. After that the discussion turned into people remembering the terrors of the Trujillo era and on books and movies made on the topic. A very similar discussion was repeated in July when the facilitators posted a YouTube video highlighting Hermanas Mirabal [three sisters that were killed by the Trujillo regime and that became national heroes]. Trujillo obviously still, 50 years after his death, is a very contradictory character in Dominican history. What is positive about these discussions is that this forum allows for many different opinions to be voiced, youth that has not experienced this era and does not necessarily learn about it in school in the US, can hear stories from the elder members from different backgrounds and with different memories than parents and relatives.

Limiting the freedom of speech and press was something that the government of the Dominican Republic was blamed for. In *Dominicans* there was a link to a newspaper article reporting closing down a TV-channel that had been operating for nearly 20 years.¹⁶ According to the article, the channel was officially closed for ‘payment irregularities and illegal transmission’ but that the closing down was heavily criticized by vice-president and former president of Inter-American organization for freedom of press as well as the head of a Dominican journalism college. They claim the real reason behind the closure was the channel’s way of criticizing government officials and draw parallels with events in Venezuela where the freedom of press has been limited during Chavez’s presidency. There was a similar discussion in August as newspaper *Clave* was closed down with rumours of death threats directed at the editor-in-chief after the newspaper ran an article on ties between a drug lord and the chief of national police.

¹⁶ The article can be found at: <http://www.elnacional.com.do/nacional/2010/3/27/43902/Firme-oposicion-a-cierre-canal-TV> Accessed 13 Dec, 2011.

The Dominican Republic proclaimed a new constitution in 2010. This constitution was noted by a member in *Dominicans* that posted a link to a newspaper article on it. He commented that many say that it sets democracy back decades. There was no discussion following this, which I find curious, since the new constitution does contain rather radical changes; it sets a total ban on abortion – life is protected from conception and does not recognize the rights of same-sex couples in any way – only unions between a man and a woman are recognized¹⁷. Perhaps the topic was considered old, as the process began already 2008. The country seems to follow in the footsteps of Nicaragua, whose constitutional changes faced an international outcry while the changes in the Dominican Republic gained much less interest. This is most likely due to the aid dependency of Nicaragua, which allows the donors to interfere more openly with changes in the constitution of a country.

The Dominican Republic was criticized for violence and poor security situation. For example, in June alone several posts on *Dominicans* commented the situation. There was a post on an event that took place in 1994 in Santo Domingo when a human rights activist, journalist, professor and attorney N. González was allegedly detained by the agents of the DR government and disappeared. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had investigated the case but the government denied all knowledge. The members of the site just commented that this was nothing new but a common practice in the DR since Trujillo. More recent cases also posted in June included a story of an attorney who won his case against a casino deal and got assassinated and the deal went through after the assassination. A businessman was accused of paying 90 million dollars for the murder of the head of the police. An article appeared claiming that there is a need to take urgent action against hired assassins that can make you disappear if you anger the ‘wrong people’ and that the corrupt military is involved in this. An angry mob took the law in its own hands and killed a suspected attacker since the people did not trust the police to take action. A Puerto Rican indictment claimed that Dominican authorities helped a notorious drug lord to escape from their custody.

¹⁷ The Dominican constitution can be found at <http://www.bibliotecasvirtuales.com/biblioteca/constituciones/Dominicana/ConstitucionDominicana.pdf> The right to life from conception can be found on page ten (article 37) and the recognition of only man-woman unions in article 55 on pages 16-17. Accessed 12 Dec, 2011.

The police killed a law student while allegedly searching for criminals. The facilitator commented that this is common practice in the DR; he has been personally ambushed by the police that were claiming to be searching for criminals but were in fact looking for money. A member commented that the police also killed her husband. One member told that his trip back home was cancelled due to the poor security situation back there. All the examples above were from stories posted in June. The news on violence, police misconduct, poor security and corruption continued throughout the year although not quite as often as in June 2010.

Even though the dominant discourse on these sites was that the political situation in the Dominican Republic is poor, democracy flailing, corruption rife, security situation worsening and anything can happen; sometimes even criticizing the DR government found a limit. A careless post by the facilitator of *Dominicans* where someone else's extremely provocative caption on an article was posted on the site as their own, lead to an interesting discussion. It started with an article on planned deployment of Dominican soldiers in Haiti with a UN peacekeeping mission. Someone had captioned the article claiming that it was beginning of the unification of the island and claiming that the US had interest in the matter. This caption was posted along with the article so that it appeared to be the comment of the facilitator. There was an outcry against unification and US meddling. After a while the facilitator tried to redirect the discussion to concentrate on the involvement in the peacekeeping mission. Then a member asked whether this was real news as no one in the Dominican Republic knew anything about it. That meant that the member had been active and checked with her family and/or friends living on the island on the issue. After that another member commented that he in fact read the article that was linked to the comment and that it did not mention unification at all and he later wondered how the *Dominicans* site that he feels is generally trustworthy would post the article with such a leading and subjective caption and how so many people would comment on it without reading the article. After this the facilitator clarified what the article did and did not contain and this calmed the discussion. The next day a follow-up story was posted trying to clarify the situation and the original source of the caption was identified and reposted. This discussion was interesting, because it shows that at least some members impose the

principles of media criticism on the posts appearing on these sites well and compare them with information from other sources such as contacts in the home country. They also publicly bring up the inconsistencies found. This leads me to believe that the information posted on the sites is on the average relatively accurate and reliable, even if not always objective and neutral. Also the facilitators of *Dominicans* warned against sources “*read with a grain of salt*” that may not be very reliable if these were suggested by its members.

One member commented that during the months that he has been a member he does not remember seeing even one positive story on Dominican Republic on *Dominicans*. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but the truth is that criticizing the political situation in the country of origin was extremely common also in the forums I examined like the vast majority of migrants do according to Levitt and Nyberg Sørensen (2004, 9).

4.5.2 *US politics*

Elections were held in the US on November 2, 2010. This was a midterm election with seats available in the US House of Representatives and Senate along with state legislatures, governorships and local bodies. There were also other political issues that were discussed on the forums throughout the year such as the annual State of the Union speech by the President, immigration laws, most notably the Arizona bill, and other local issues. These will be discussed below.

4.5.2.1 *Voting and supporting*

State of the Union

In January president Obama gave his first annual State of the Union speech. *Dominicans in New York* asked their members if anyone was watching the speech and what they thought about it. There were several positive answers and comments supporting Obama. The support can be explained through at least two factors. Obama represents the Democratic Party that is generally thought to be more popular among people with lower socio-economic status, a classification under which most Dominican migrants fall. Secondly many Dominican-American migrants are of colour and identify with Obama who is the first African-American president. The *Dominicans* facilitator posted a link to the YouTube video on the speech the day after the speech. This

surprisingly received two very negative comments on Obama, one calling him a joke and the other saying that he is worse than that, he's actually real. However, when *Dominicans* asked in an anonymous poll whether the members had voted for Obama, McCain, or someone else, 77% of the respondents answered that they had voted for Obama.

9/11

The facilitator of *Dominicans* posted a comment on September 11th:

"A sad day. But a day to reflect on the historical role of the US around the world and the lost lives everywhere. Those that know their history will understand. Moment of Silence"

To me as an outsider, a European, this post appears innocent enough when compared with the continuous harsh comments against the Dominican government. The post appeared to reflect both the military coup supported by the CIA in Chile in 1973 as well as the events that have unravelled around the world since the terrorist attack in 2001. However, this post seems to be very loaded and at least posted on a sensitive day. There was a comment that said that it is reprehensible to even hint that the US is somehow at fault for the events of 2001 and that we [the US] are at war with a "vile and degenerate ideology". Others said that other countries wait for the US to resolve all the problems around the world and that the country is powerful and people patriots and that they will stand strong, proud, resilient and united. Two posts even contained the common exclamation "God bless America". There was only one post supporting the facilitator that comments on the tragedies that US has ignored and goes on naming Holocaust, Rwandan genocide and hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans in 2005 as examples. This prompted a couple of comments, one saying that the country may not be perfect but it is still the best place and the other explaining away these events by saying that not allowing Jewish people to enter in World War II was a mistake, Rwanda was a civil war and the mistakes committed in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina was the fault of an incompetent mayor for not requesting assistance. He concluded his comment by adding that the US cannot be there for every nation and that we [the US] are in a 'damned if we do and damned if we don't' situation and that September 11th is not the day to allude to supposed US faults around the world. It is interesting how strong patriotic feelings towards the US there are among the migrants that still in other situations assert very strongly their Dominican identity.

Elections

Dominicans in Philadelphia prompted its members to take the time to vote in the Congressional elections. In *Dominicans* the facilitator posted several comments urging the members to vote already in September. The early ones advised the members to check that they were registered to vote. The posts also reminded about the possibility to vote early and had a link to a page where one could check where the nearest polling station was located. An example of later comments:

"2010 US Congressional Elections: 8 days to get your votes in by Nov. 2. VOTE and make a difference. Believe it or not YOUR vote counts!"

On the day of the election there was a post

"We voted today. Have You? If so Say DOMINICAN VOTED BELOW :)"

This over a month long commentary on the elections seemed to aim at making the elections an important event to the members of the site and thus encourage them to participate and vote. This seemed to bring positive reactions towards the elections.

Not all posts were impartial. In *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* there is a post by a member urging all Dominican-American US citizens to vote for the Democrats in the November elections. This would guarantee a just migratory reform, continued support to the healthcare reform and financial reform and continued support to

"nuestro Respetado y Distinguidisimo Presidente Barack Obama" [our Respected and Most Distinguished President Barack Obama].

There were no comments to this post, which in most other forums examined would certainly have provoked much discussion. In *Dominicans* after the election the facilitator of the site posted a political cartoon spreading online where there's a picture of George W. Bush and the text "I screwed you all but thanks for blaming in on the black guy". This provoked a lot of comments. Most of them were amused and supportive such as "lol reposting" [laughing out loud and reposting it on my own profile]. There were a few more analytical comments, for example, one stating that the US wants immediate gratification – if things do not change in two years, the people will vote for the other party, even though changes take time. Then he added

"We need to stop being a microwave society".

This seems fairly astute political analysis to be appearing on a Facebook site.

There was a controversial “Don’t vote” ad by a group called Latinos for Reform urging Latino voters not to vote for Congressmen that failed to deliver on their immigration reform promises. The Spanish-language channel Univision refused to air the ad. The facilitator of *Dominicans* posted a link to the ads on YouTube, explained the dispute between Univision and Latinos for Reform and asked the members

“What do you think about this? Will YOU be voting this November?”

One third of the members that commented on this said that they would not be voting, while two thirds were going to vote. By those choosing to vote the ad was seen as ignorant and voting was considered a right and a privilege.

4.5.2.2 Dominican-American politicians

As discussed in chapter 2.3 Dominicans have had representatives in several city councils and even in the State Senate in New York. In *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York* members and facilitators actively introduce these and other Dominicans involved in US politics. For example, in January in *Dominicans in New York* a Dominican-American Counsel for State Senator was highlighted and the same day the same member also shared an article from a Dominican online newspaper about a Dominican-born judge that won a bench in New York State Supreme Court. Several other stories introducing successful Dominican-Americans in US political life in the State of New York were published throughout the year, latest ones in November, when State Senate and Assembly elections were held. The facilitator posted a comment “Dominicans are becoming a force in NY Politics” as four Dominicans won seats at the election. A member from New Jersey also reminded that there one city had a Dominican-American mayor and few other cities had Dominican-American political representatives as well. *Dominicans* announced the election of first Latino mayor in Massachusetts, when Dominican-American William Lantigua was elected the mayor of the town of Lawrence.

On a less positive note, *Dominicans in New York* posted two stories of corruption by Dominicans in the US. One was of a restaurant-owner that tried to bribe the official to get a permit to sell alcohol. The second story was more serious. It was a link to New York Times article about sentencing of a former Dominican-American Councilman to five years in prison for misuse of public funds intended for non-profit organizations.

The latter story raised several comments varying from “*he is a thief*” to a comment according to which there are plenty of other corrupt politicians that are just too smart to get caught. One commentator pointed out that not all Dominicans should be judged by this one idiot. There was even a comment from a former classmate stating that the councilman can take care of himself and the community should just move on. This story was also posted on *Dominicans* where the councilman is accused of setting Dominicans back a decade in their struggle to fight stereotypes.

4.5.2.3 Immigration as a central political theme

The issue in US political debate that prompted most discussion on the forums studied was immigration. Immigration is also a topic for wider public debate in the US, particularly the issue of undocumented migration. Undocumented migration from the Dominican Republic is a cause for concern; it has even prompted the Dominican Navy along with the US Embassy in the Dominican Republic to commission ads to deter boaters fleeing the country. Such a video ad was posted on *Dominicans* and the people were asked to give their opinions in the matter. Comments stated that the ad was harsh but truthful and if the DR were better, there would be no need to leave. One member draws parallels in the wider Latin American context stating that if the US did not interfere with Latin American internal affairs there would be no need to migrate in millions.

Immigration on these forums was mainly discussed through the campaign against a new Arizona bill that was extremely tough on undocumented migrants and was considered racist against Latinos by many, not least by many of the members in the forums I studied. Sections of the law were blocked by a federal judge just hours before it was supposed to take effect. The law was later amended clearly prohibiting racial profiling. (Arizona Senate 2010, Huffington Post 2010) Immigration was debated also in connection with deportations of legal residents and building the wall against the Mexican border along with other issues. Immigration issues also prompted civic activism and racist responses that will be discussed below.

The Arizona immigration bill

This bill received much attention especially on *Dominicans*. It was also noted by *Dominicans in New York*, whose facilitator asked the members of the group what they thought of the Arizona Bill in July. Statements like *insane* and *full of s**** were used but also more constructively the law was said to be unconstitutional and allow for racial profiling. The facilitator posted a link stating that the law had been partially blocked by a judge as it was seen to target Latinos. There was one member though that was of the opinion that there is no such thing as racial profiling and the person wanted stricter immigration laws.

On *Dominicans* the bill was discussed often over a long period time, it was first brought up in April when the signing the bill into a law was reported. A part of the caption to the article read:

"Alert (Especially Latinos in Arizona): New Bill Signed into Law Today by Republican Governor of Arizona Jan Brewer Will Be The Toughest Law Against illegal Immigration in the Country! Some believe it's practically Racial Profiling. "Warrants Are No Longer Needed To Go Into A House By Police If You Are Suspected of being an immigrant..."

This post prompted a very lively discussion where many members said that the law is discriminatory, allows racial profiling, and goes against civil rights. There were a couple of comments that went against the others. First one by a member living in Arizona that brought up the problems that the state has with "bad immigrants" that are involved in drug smuggling, human trafficking and murders. Still, this member recognized the law as faulty but saw the complexities of the situation. Another member commented that it is a law and all laws must be abided. He was strongly against undocumented migration and mentioned how his parents waited years to enter legally and those unhappy with the situation should just move somewhere else.

In May there were active campaigns against the bill that will be discussed below in the civic activism section. Also in May there was a YouTube video on television news on Arizona where a Latino man was called a wetback¹⁸ and killed by his neighbor. The news report concluded that the incident was not racial but in the YouTube the video's

¹⁸ Derogatory term, racial slur referring to person with foreign nationality, usually undocumented Mexicans in the US. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wetback_%28slur%29 Accessed 6 Jan, 2012

heading went: "White Man Shoots Latino Neighbor in AZ Over Immigration Law", i.e. the incident was linked to the bill. This post provoked dozens of replies with all condemning the incident and all but one recognizing its racial linkages. The comments also reminded that the US is a country built by immigrants and that if the current immigrants would leave the country, it could not function.

As the most controversial sections of the law were blocked in July by federal judge, *Dominicans* posted a link to a Huffington Post article on the topic. This received many positive and victorious comments although one member commented that people should remember the Marielitos¹⁹. The member wrote that what happens to the illegal migrants is unfair but one has to put one's own family and well-being first. I find the comparison somewhat irrelevant as the Marielitos received refugee status immediately upon arrival and thus they were in fact not illegal migrants at all whereas the objections against the Arizona Bill were directed against racially profiling all Latinos as suspect illegal immigrants and treated accordingly. The law was further brought up in *Dominicans* in August when the facilitators posted an article that speculates that private prison industry behind the Immigration bill. This time the post did not provoke discussion.

Immigration and racial profiling are issues that get the members identify more commonly with the pan-ethnic Latino cluster in the US. There acting as a part of a bigger group that shares the same problems makes sense.

Deportations

Dominicans in New York brought up the issue of deportations of legal permanent residents for minor offenses. According to the article linked on the site, up to 40,000 Dominicans had been deported since the law was enacted in 1996. This was also

¹⁹ Marielitos are refugees that came with the Mariel boatlift, which was a mass emigration of Cubans who departed from Cuba's Mariel Harbor for the United States between April 15 and October 31, 1980. The Cuban government announced that anyone who wanted to leave could do so, and an exodus by boat started shortly afterward. It was later discovered, that a number of the exiles had been released from Cuban jails and mental health facilities. These exiles were called undesirables. The public perception was that the refugees consisted largely of undesirables. The Mariel boatlift ended by mutual agreement between the two governments involved in October 1980. By that point, as many as 125,000 Cubans had made the journey to Florida. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariel_boatlift Accessed 6 Jan, 2012.

discussed on *Dominicans* and the facilitator was not aware that deportation of green card holders was possible, but a member explained that it had happened to a family member of hers. One commentator stated that US has a right to deport whomever it wishes, even though there are double standards as Cubans do not usually get deported due to political reasons whereas there is no such exception for Dominicans. Another member said that he has heard many different stories but has not yet seen any evidence of that happening to anyone with legal status and a green card. It seems remarkable to me that there is so little awareness of a fifteen year old law that entails mandatory deportation procedures also for green card holders convicted of certain crimes and aggravated felonies even though many Dominicans have been deported under it. It could be because of the stigma of being a felon or criminal that is attached to this law makes the people that face this to keep quiet or lie about the reason for their departure. It should be noted however that the crime or felony that leads to deportation does not always have to be very serious, nor recent – for example, shop-lifting charges or other aggravated felonies in the youth may lead to deportation as an adult²⁰.

4.5.3 Civic activism

In addition to voting and participation in party politics, I understand the definition of political practices as something that can include political activities outside electoral politics such as civic activism as also noted by Itzigsohn & al (1999, 324). Kollock & Smith (1999, 19) note that communities in cyberspace can spill out into the 'real world' and be used to incite collective action such as social protests.

I found evidence of this in my analysis of the discussions, more specifically in issues related to immigration, the environment, police violence and education. Civic activism could be found in issues related to Dominican as well as US politics.

Immigration was an issue that lead to civic activism both online as well as offline. A member on *Dominicans in New York* posted an invitation in two languages to an

²⁰More information on this for example on FindLaw for legal professionals at: <http://library.findlaw.com/1999/Nov/1/129798.html> accessed 6 Dec, 2011 and Morawetz Nancy: Understanding the impact of the 1996 deportation law and the limited scope of proposed reforms in Harward Law Review 2000, Vol. 113(8) pp. 1936-1962)

immigration forum to be held in the Bronx and hosted by a Dominican-American State Senator. The Arizona Bill discussed previously was the motivator for most civic action related to immigration issues. On *Dominicans* there was an internet-based campaign, where a popular game cartoon character Dora, is shown in a police arrest photo with a black eye. The captioning for the picture went:

"Everybody Should Know About The Big Arizona Immigration Bill That Was Signed The Other Day Practically Allowing "Racial Profiling On Anyone Who Looks Latino" So In Light Of That We Came Across A Pic of Dora. Apparently This New Law is So Serious The Sheriff's Even Got DORA!"

This provoked many comments, mostly playing along with the joke, but a few also saying that this was no joking matter and that Latinos should unite under this issue and fight together. Another campaign active outside Facebook on this topic were the Immigration Reform Marches that were set up by an organization called Reform Immigration for America. The organization actively follows, comments and informs about immigration legislation and debate all around the United States and organizes marches and other public actions. The organization named First of May as "MAYDAY" to raise awareness on the Arizona Bill and organized marches all around the US to fight the laws that they deem unconstitutional and in order to prevent similar bills to be adopted in other states. There were several posts by the facilitators and comments by the members relating to the marches and the Bill. There was again one member pointing out that she did not see the law as racial profiling, even though she also was against it. She claimed that the *Dominicans* facilitators live on the other side of the country and have no idea what is really going on in Arizona. To this the facilitator replied that they have correspondents also in Phoenix.

Dream Act was another immigration-related campaign endorsed on the *Dominicans*. The post contained a plea to the members to keep calling their senators and representatives in order to pass the bill. The bill is to help individuals that have inherited their illegal status to enter the citizenship path by enlisting in the military or going to college. The post on *Dominicans* linked to the Dream Act Portal where the campaign was actively promoted. This post was met with positive feedback but also very sceptical comments asking who was going to pay for it and wishing people luck in finding political support for a bill whose primary benefactors are not qualified to vote.

The earlier-mentioned event where the police shot a presenter in the Dominican Republic lead to a quick and widespread campaign on the internet “Policia, no me mate, yo me paro” [Police, don’t kill me, I’ll stop]. The campaign was initiated and spread on the internet on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, also in *Dominicans*, blogs and other online media but spilled over to ‘real world’ among youth, university students and other people in the form of a song, videos, t-shirts and finally demonstrations on the streets, discussions on radio and TV forcing the government and the police to take action.²¹

Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook was the site with least discussion related to political issues among the forums examined. This is understandable as the facilitator of the site is a high school student not eligible to vote. Yet even here the facilitator expressed civic activism in an issue he considered important, namely education. In 2010, related to the senate elections in the Dominican Republic there was a campaign that tried to get the politicians to commit four percent of the national budget to education. According to the facilitator of the site, the campaign met resistance from the middle class of the country and as a result the participants tried to raise awareness for the campaign by staging common action. The facilitator of the site urged the members of the group to support the campaign and to participate on this action. However, perhaps because there was no background to this post nor was this a site that otherwise sent political messages or had posts with political connotations, even this post met with very little response, just a few ‘likes’ indicating support but no discussion. The same campaign was acknowledged in *Dominicans*.

Environmental activism gained ground on Dominican Facebook sites. Barrick Gold is a multinational mining company operating also in the Dominican Republic and the alleged environmental degradation the company causes in the Dominican Republic was discussed on three of the five forums I studied throughout the year. In February a member posted a link in *Dominicans in New York* to a blog on environmental

²¹ The search with “Policia no me mate yo me paro” gives over a million hits on Google search including YouTube videos, blogs, Facebook groups, newspaper articles, song lyrics and so on. For example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF4Ye3gu_EA (Accessed 18 Dec, 2011) shows a news video of the movement with comments from the police and a government official.

degradation in the Dominican Republic. The post reported that Presa de Hatillo, the largest natural sweet water lake on the Caribbean and a popular ecotourism spot was being contaminated by Barrick Gold. According to posts on *Dominicans*, the same company has been accused of causing degradation in Australia and Argentina. At the same time on *Dominicans* there were several posts urging people to take their vacations in April in Cotui where there was going to be a cultural and political event including demonstrations against Barrick Gold. They were inviting social and cultural groups, political actors and parties, artists and foundations supporting their cause. In March, *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* posted information on an event being organized in Santo Domingo against Barrick Gold. The post prompted no response from the other members. However, likely as a response to the events organized, the company pledged to clean up the pollution. An article on the company's comments was posted on *Dominicans*. However, there seemed to be very little faith among the members that the clean-up would actually take place, the comments blame foreign companies of abusing the country and moving on. This lead to accusations of corruption in the government that allows this kind of behaviour from companies.

4.6 Social practices

Itzigsohn & al (1999, 330-331) describe narrow civil-societal transnational practices as initiatives that are not mainly economic or political, such as, for example, home town associations or a Dominican organization trying to improve the image of Dominican migrants. Under broad definition of the practices fall such initiatives as sports leagues and religious groups.

The description of an initiative trying to improve the reputation of Dominicans actually describes two of the sites studied; they would as a concept fit into this category, perhaps most notably *Dominicans* and MiBodega, but to a somewhat lesser extent also *Dominicans in New York*. Dominican immigrants do not have the best reputation in the US, there are several negative stereotypes. During the 1990's Washington Heights gained reputation as the centre for drug trafficking and violent crime, which was often mistakenly associated with the Dominican community there as a whole. As discussed earlier, Dominican migrants do not have a particularly good public image in the

Dominican Republic either, they are often portrayed as Dominicanyorks that make their money with illicit methods such as drug dealing or prostitution and then come to show off in the DR. *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York* attempt to combat these negative stereotypes by highlighting successful Dominicans and successful Dominican-Americans. According to *Dominicans*, this is done to educate and inform the members and also to give them role models. It is an effort to change the image and to reconstruct identities of Dominican migrants. *Dominicans in New York* linked to a documentary on Dominican-Americans with captioning:

"...is a documentary tribute to the largest foreign-born ethnic group in New York City."

Next comment continued the same train of thought:

"Being a Dominican American is having the best of both worlds. We have our rich and beautiful culture and we are also Americans reaching for our dreams of prosperity."

The sites highlighted historically important persons from the Dominican Republic, such as presidents, founding fathers or the Mirabal sisters who were a part of the resistance that ended the rule of Trujillo. Also recent success stories from the Dominican Republic were published. However, most of these stories were of successful Dominican-American migrants just like the members. The persons highlighted include athletes from baseball and basketball players to swimmers and sprinters, actors, dancers, singers and bands, media personalities, politicians, engineers and designers, such as Oscar de la Renta that was highlighted in *Dominicans in New York*. *Dominicans* also asked their members to list from which universities they have graduated, which also encouraged younger members. These posts seem to support Itzigsohn & al (1999, 333-335) argument, that the definitions of the boundaries and content of 'Dominicanness' are becoming transnational and successful examples give the migrants an increasing sense of legitimacy as Dominicans. A member commented on one such post:

"I'm so proud to be Dominican; finally we are showing that isn't only drugs!!!..."

Dominicans actively searched bloggers and students to join their team and searching for and commenting on material on Dominicans Republic and issues relevant to Dominican migrants in the US. When a member posted interesting and well-founded comments, the facilitators openly encouraged the member to participate on the

discussions on a regular basis. They also built up their network by inviting organizations and companies to partner up with the Agency and site. They announced that they would be establishing a tab "Dominicans University" under which all organizations/clubs in different US Universities with Dominican or Latino connections would be brought together. To allow for more immediate and private contacts between members, the site opened a chat room.

Ulrich Beck (2000, 29) found that arriving Mexican migrant workers in addition to relatives and acquaintances could also turn to a network of informal support groups, specialist services and solidarity organizations. The sites I study can and sometimes do act as such support networks. At times members sought information on Dominican services and organizations as discussed previously on economic practices. Other examples include requesting advice on a school project on a historical Dominican person on *Dominicans in New York* and asking for translation help (from English into Spanish) for a letter to be sent to a family member in the Dominican Republic on *Dominicans*. Someone tried to find the registry for deaths in the DR and asked members on *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* to help. Yet, there was less this kind of contact than I had presumed, perhaps partially due to the fact that the sites were relatively new. At least *Dominicans* with the backing of MiBodega agency and *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* with its relatively small amount of members and closer relations between them seemed to be slowly developing into that direction. *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* had posts from several different charitable organizations: one was collecting books for children in the rural areas of the Dominican Republic, another one collected old toys, third one was looking for blood donors, fourth was offering free legal assistance to immigrants that have been victims of fraud or other crimes or unfair treatment in the US. On these sites, some of the members also looked for connections with friends or relatives, people from old home communities or Dominican people in the places where they have recently moved or are visiting. The people looking for friends or relatives were either attempting to track down a long-lost friend or just generally trying to find some new relatives that they do not yet know. There were also signs of closer contacts between members outside these forums.

All the groups promoted Dominican activities online. There were ads for Dominican blogs, and videos and also some cross-advertising; for example, as *Dominicans in Philadelphia* was founded, the facilitator posted an invitation on *Dominicans in New York*. There were some meetings and organizations outside the virtual world that are promoted. Some events promoted had site members involved in organizing. The Dominican Day Parade is a large event that thousands of the members participate in. There is also a popular Annual National Dominican Student Conference for Dominican students all around the US held at Cornell University in New York State that was being heavily promoted on both *Dominicans* as well as *Dominicans in New York*. There were hundreds of participants and the members participating were asked to report on the atmosphere at the events and to post pictures from them so that also those that are not able to participate can get a feeling of those events. Organizations, such as the Dominican American Alliance in New Jersey was activating Dominicans to get involved in their current home communities and advertising its services on *Dominicans in New York*. The Facebook site and other activities of the Dominican Studies Institute at the City College of New York were promoted. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* there was a post that invited members to join a philosophy study group. *Dominicans in New York* posted an invitation to join Washington Heights Facebook page. That site was not only for Dominicans, but the Heights is known as a predominantly Dominican-American neighbourhood.

Religion and sports gained some attention, however very little in a context that would imply shared social transnational practices. The sports posts commented on famous Dominican athletes and results of American football and baseball [or beisbol] World Series, Dominican Series and Caribbean championships, which Dominican Republic won 2010. Religion received most attention on *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook*. One member posted a comment:

En momentos felices, alaba a Dios. En momentos difíciles, busca a Dios. En momentos de tranquilidad, ora a Dios. En momentos de dolor, confía en Dios. En cada momento agradece a Dios. [In happy times I praise the Lord, in difficult times I search for the Lord, in peaceful times I pray to the Lord, in times of pain I rely on the Lord and in every moment I thank the Lord.]

When there was a storm coming towards Dominican Republic, another member commented by saying that they are wet, but protected by God. On another occasion a week later the facilitator asked for protection from God, without explaining any further. On yet another post he prompted the members to remember December and exclaims that he loves God. He also discussed celebrating Easter week on several posts, though they related mostly to eating a traditional Dominican delicacy called *habichuelas con dulce*. One member commented that the Easter week is for spiritual contemplation and that she will be staying at home enjoying the word of the Lord – and *habichuelas con dulce*. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* a member posted a comment urging people to preach the evangel to young Dominicans so that they will not choose alcohol and drugs instead of educating themselves and building a successful life. Religious holidays were recognized also by *Dominicans in New York*, they at times asked the members to recount customs related to these. Examples include practicing Lent, the custom of getting ashes on one's forehead on Ash Wednesday and celebrating Good Friday. These religious posts received relatively little feedback from the members. One member even pointed out that not all Dominicans are Christians and that for him Good Friday it is just another day.

4.6.1 *Shared experiences*

According to Davydova (2006, 50), the migrants need to have common experiences of places and everyday life in the sending country in order to be able to discuss online. These common experiences form a shared understanding that enable the creation of compassion and trust towards the speaker, feeling of intimacy and a sense of 'we'. On *Dominicans* the facilitator occasionally posted a black picture with captioning: "*se fue la luz*" [*the lights are out*]. Electricity blackouts are almost an everyday occurrence on the island. This got the members reminiscing about their life or visits in the Dominican Republic. Another example that invoked memories of home country was a video of a crowing rooster, which is a common sound in the mornings especially on Dominican countryside.

Another thing that according to Davydova (2006, 50) most of the participants have in common is the migration experience. If migration experience is defined narrowly to

include only the process of moving from one country to another, I found very little discussion related to the migration experience. In the Dominican the issue seems to be sensitive and especially undocumented migrants can understandably be unwilling to discuss their status and migration process on an open forum where it is often reported that government officials look for information²². There were some discussions in which the illegal status of members was implied. For example, when a member on *Dominicans in New York* encouraged everyone to fill in the census forms, she emphasizes the fact that immigration officials are not allowed to use census information.

On the forums I studied, many, perhaps even a majority of the people participating have neither lived in Dominican Republic nor migrated. Yet also they strongly asserted belonging to the Dominican community and having a Dominican identity. At times they could relate to the discussions based on their visits on the island or on the experiences of their parents and relatives. But more importantly, what became apparent in these groups was that even without having lived in the Dominican Republic or migrated, they shared common migration experience when defined to include also the life as a migrant. They shared the experience of living as a Dominican migrant in their US home communities. Living in homes where the traditions, customs and methods of upbringing came from the Dominican Republic and at the same time living in a society with differing customs and expectations. Attending US schools and trying to enter the workforce in the US categorized as a Dominican migrant and facing stereotyping and racism in the society they lived in. They participated in cultural events of Dominicans, Latinos and also local - US events. Very few could relate to everything that was discussed on these sites but everyone could relate to something and thus strengthen their feeling of belonging to the Dominican community.

Dominicans in New York strengthened this feeling of belonging and intimacy of community by posting photos and news on local incidents and events that affected the Dominican community in New York and particularly the Heights. The news of a young

²² see for example the New York Times Editorial Dec 12, 09
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/opinion/13sun2.html?_r=2

Dominican “Drug Queen” from the Heights being sentenced to 25 years in prison is posted. When two local Dominican youth die in a car crash, this was reported on the site:

“Two young Dominican men died early Saturday morning in a car crash in Washington Heights. One of them had just graduated from HS. My prayers go out to the xxx family...may your son RIP” [RIP→Rest in Peace]

Several of the members joined in the prayers and wishes and also a close member of the family participates in the discussion. These posts were not a part of a planned strategy by the facilitator but an expression of a community, caring and closeness that was shared both on- as well as offline.

Miller & Slater (2000, 65) noticed in their study on Trinidadians on the internet that an important aspect of communality included sharing of mundane life. My study strongly supports this notion. The most active and viable groups constantly offered people opportunities to sharing the. *Dominicans* were a perfect example of this. Almost daily they asked the members for their plans for the day or what they were doing [in Dominican k lo k] or for the highlights of the day. They also asked members’ opinions on a wide array of issues from first date do’s and don’ts to how to celebrate Independence day or 4th of July. They arranged polls on topical issues and quizzes on the DR, posted pictures of shared experiences such as power cuts and snow storms, and posted a video of a Dominican mother shouting to her teenager that many members could identify with. In addition to constant postings, they also offered the members opportunities to chat with each other and the facilitators on the site.

Shared experiences with other members in these offered people a forum where a sense of community could be created as the participants had a shared understanding of many issues the members face in their lives. This feeling was strengthened by actively discussing the everyday events of the members so as to keep the understanding on-going even if the situations of members’ evolved.

4.7 Cultural practices

Cultural transnationalism refers to practices and institutions that take part in the formation of meanings, identities and values. They are processes defining the changing discourses about what it is to be Dominican, both in the Dominican Republic and abroad. (Itzigsohn & al 1999, 332) Miller & Slater (2000, 86 & 105) observed that the Trinidadians online were continuously aware of themselves as Trini in terms of seeing their everyday life through their identity and difference. They even noted that personal identity was assumed to be subsumed within the sense of being Trinidadian. This was also true on the Dominican sites that I studied as will be shown below. The self-image of the members as Dominicans or Dominican-Americans and how they express their belonging to these groups is examined here. Bernal (2006, 171-173) found that postings announced Eritrean-related activities in the diaspora and reminded about national holidays, historical anniversaries and milestones, as well as media critiques. The discussants had an opportunity to display their knowledge of Eritrean history and folklore. They regarded the Dehai-site like a mirror that reflects, reinforces and validates Eritrean experience and identity. It is also an arena for entertainment and status production. National holidays, historical milestones and Dominican history and folklore were also discussed on the sites I examined. There were discussions that are easily identifiable as cultural – for example those relating to music, dance, food, film, theatre, folklore and literature. Yet there were also less obvious cultural themes relating to identity formation, such as discussions on language, ethnicity and race. These are extremely important in understanding how the members of these sites see themselves and construct their identities.

4.7.1 Music, dance, film, theatre, folklore, food and literature

When the members on the *Dominicans* were asked how they represent themselves as Dominicans, flag, food, dance and the language got most mentions. Cultural transnational practices include among others music, dance, film, folklore, food and literature. There were also other identity markers present on the sites examined. In its simplest form, Dominican identity was manifested through core symbols such as the Dominican flag that was present everywhere in the pages as well as in dozens of profile pictures of the members. *Dominicans in New York* and *Dominicans* posted also

maps of the country and some of its provinces along with photos from famous or particularly beautiful places in the Dominican Republic. *Dominicans in Philadelphia* offered basic statistics and information on the Dominican Republic while *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* posted lyrics to the national anthem to their information page. Dominican Independence Day on 27 February naturally prompted many posts with expressions of pride for being a Dominican and links to historical events and persons along with members sharing information on how the day will be celebrated. The traditional identity markers mixed with sharing the mundane and keeping the traditions alive, act as Dominican identity confirming practices and building blocks for the strengthening of the online communities.

4.7.1.1 Music and dance

Merengue, a popular music and dance form originating from the Dominican Republic, is according to Itzigsohn & al (1999, 333-335) a defining element of Dominican identity and there certainly was much discussion around this theme. Another Dominican dance and musical genre is Bachata, which also received ample attention. On *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* there was a strong comment by a member linking Merengue and Bachata to the Dominican identity:

"Por que será, que en muchos Latin clubs de NYC, La Bachata y El Merengue no lo tocan tan frecuente como la Salsa? Yo he observado que en varios nightclubs, los Dominicanos no se han unido para promover nuestros ritmos, y se han vendido a la Salsa. Lo digo responsablemente a esos compatriotas, que por favour apoyen lo nuestro y que busquen su identidad!" [Why is it that in many Latin clubs of NYC, they don't play Bachata or Merengue as often as salsa? I have noticed that in many nightclubs, Dominicans have not united to promote our rhythms and they have sold out to Salsa. I tell responsibly to these countrymen: please support what's ours and search your identity!]

Music and artists gained much attention on the sites; there were dozens of posts related to them, many with videos and polls. Members were polled on their favourite Merengue and Bachata artists and songs and classic videos were posted for the members to reminisce about. A much-mentioned band was Aventura, famous Dominican-American band playing Bachata and R&B that made the cover of Billboard, a well-known music magazine. *Dominicans in Philadelphia* posted the news of this achievement. A member on *Dominicans in New York* posted a poll on a favourite Aventura song. There were several links to Aventura's music videos on YouTube and *Dominicans* posted a comment on an Aventura concert in Madison Square Garden as

well as congratulations to them for winning several awards on Univision's Premio Lo Nuestro. Another very famous Dominican artist is Juan Luis Guerra, who plays mostly Merengue and Bolero music. He was discussed often on both *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York*. The latter held a poll asking the members to name their favourite among his songs. The facilitator also posted links to his videos on YouTube inviting the members to enjoy his music. *Dominicans* actively helped to promote and up-and-coming Dominican Bachata band Loisadas by posting their videos and achievements on several occasions. Also other Dominican and Dominican-American artists performing, for example, pop, rap, salsa or R&B were highlighted on the sites. Kat de Luca, A Dominican-born New Yorker received both positive and very negative comments in the style:

"pero se le fueron los humos a la cabeza" [the fame went to her head]

"One hit wonder"

One of the members commented the negative feedback:

"Why is it that when some Dominican gets a level of success we are the first ones putting him/her down? I see people from other ethnicities with limited talent reaching super stars status, and our talented members are forgotten. Please lets support our people. ... Stop hating."

This received a counter-comment stating that one doesn't have to like someone just because they are Dominican. Then she added:

"I'm glad that they're at the top and repping DR. But that's about it. just don't like her music. Period."

This lead the first commentator to respond that one doesn't have to like someone just because they are Dominican but that insulting was uncalled for.

There is an artist called Arcángel who got the members' united in dislike. He was born in New York to Dominican parents, but has lived and made his career in Puerto Rico. He had allegedly said in an interview that he feels more Puerto Rican than Dominican. This enraged the members, several of them referred to the artist as *"vende patria"* [someone who has sold his country] and accused him of *"denying his heritage"*. Some suggested that he should be *"slapped with his birth certificate"* and several used also much ruder comments. Only one member reacted to this attack by saying that

"...parece que ahora somos jueces y jurado... Not cool, el Dominicano que yo conosco es trabajador, humilde y servicial con todo el mundo" [It appears that we are acting as both

the judge and the jury... Not cool, the Dominican that I know is hard-working, humble and helpful to everyone]

Dominicanos en Miami y USA was the most active in promoting cultural events and introducing Dominican and Latino talent. There were dozens of ads for Dominican or Dominican-American Merengue and Bachata artists visiting Miami throughout the year, including a monthly Bachata evening. There was a post for Dominican Thursdays held once a month introducing different aspects of Dominican culture at a local cultural club. Also two Dominican online radio channels were introduced on the site.

4.7.1.2 Film and theatre

Dominican cinema and Dominican actors received a fair amount of attention on the sites, especially on *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York*. A film on a Dominican-American youth due for release in 2011 was being heavily promoted. Actors were often highlighted among successful Dominicans, for example, Zoë Saldana from Avatar was given much publicity and received many admiring and supporting comments from the members. The site also highlighted older successful Dominican movies that have been released also in the US, such as Sugar, Sanky Panky and Andrea asking members to comment on the films and their favorite scenes in them. Visiting Dominican plays were promoted on *Dominicanos en Miami y USA*. On *Dominicans in New York*, the facilitator encouraged members to go see a play written by a Dominican playwright and starring Dominicans presented at a local New York theatre.

4.7.1.3 Folklore

Folklore and mythical Dominican characters was a topic introduced on *Dominicans in New York*. They discussed among others El Cuco [ghost/monster] common to many Latin American countries, which is well known also by the members of the site. The Chupacabra [literally goatsucker] is another monster that is common to many Latin American countries' folklore. Chiguapas are beautiful but dangerous Dominican female characters that according to the legend live on the mountains. This myth seemed to be less known, but some reported hearing of it. This allowed the members to share stories from their childhoods both on the island as well as in the US, as the parents have brought the folklore characters with them. This also enabled those members that have not had their families conveying stories of Dominican folklore to learn about it

and helped keep the myths alive among migrants. Even *Dominicans* had a few folklore-related posts. One was a poll asking whether the members believe in Brujería, witchcraft. Interestingly enough, exactly half of the respondents said they believe in it while the other half did not. Several of the respondents who did not believe in it, added that everyone may believe in what they choose to and a few of those that did believe in it emphasized that they do not practice it.

4.7.1.4 Food

Food and drink are a way sharing cultural experiences, they are a part of many celebrations and also the everyday lives of the migrants. These traditions also become a part of the second-generation migrant experiences thus carrying the Dominican culture and identity forward to future generations.

Traditional and/or typical Dominican food received very much attention in all of the forums I studied. Recipes of dishes such as la bandera dominicana [i.e. Dominican flag], chimichurry, mangu, platano con salami and habichuelas con dulce were shared, pictures posted, plans to eat or prepare these dishes were often posted and commented and even hints as to where to find some of these dishes or sweets, for example, in Florida, Philadelphia or New York were shared. Local drinks such as the Presidente beer and Brugal rum were mentioned in many comments of the members relating to holiday plans and celebrations, interestingly enough also for celebrations related to the US culture, such as the fourth of July festivities.

4.7.1.5 Literature

Literature, books written by Dominicans and Dominican migrants, is another source of cultural practices that create and recreate Dominican transnational identities and help to build the feeling of community among these migrants (Nyberg Sørensen 1998, 255). At times, they even act as a vehicle in bridging the Dominican migrant identities and community with general Dominican identity and 'Dominicanness'. Notable examples of this include Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz, both very successful Dominican-American authors that write about the experiences of migrants but also about the shared history of the Dominican Republic. Junot Díaz was noted on *Dominicans in New York* under the heading Dominican personalities and in *Dominicans* under Dominicans Spotlight. His

Pulitzer Prize was mentioned along with the two books he had written, *Drown* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The comments declared admiration for him and thanked for the recommendation. One member came to the conclusion that the book was written for Dominican migrants as many of them don't know enough of the history of the country and of Trujillo. He felt that Díaz wanted to challenge the readers to learn more about Dominican history and Dominican writers. Having read the book I feel that this comment has a point. Julia Alvarez was highlighted on both *Dominicans in New York* as well as *Dominicans*. *Dominicans* introduced her background as a child of a political refugee and explained how her work is focused on issues of assimilation and identity and investigates cultural stereotypes. The introduction on the site was based on a Wikipedia entry on Julia Alvarez. On *Dominicans in New York*, the members were invited to discuss their favourite among her books. Many of her books received mentions, but the most popular seems to be *How the García girls lost their accent*. The book is about a Dominican family that migrates to the US and about their adjustment to transnational lives. Again there were some members that have not read any of her books and took these posts as recommendations. The facilitator replied and recommended an order in which to read her books and commented:

"They are all great...they really speak to the Dominican American Experience"

4.7.2 Language, race and ethnicity as identity markers

Hall (1990, 235) explains that the diaspora experience of migrants is defined by the recognition of heterogeneity and diversity, of hybridity. According to him, diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves through transformation and difference. Glick Schiller & al (1992, 14-19) explain that the transnational context in migrants' lives develops from the interplay of historical experience, structural conditions, and the ideologies of their home and host countries. Koopmans and Statham (2003, 216-221) list different collective identities that migrants face in the public sphere: categories offered by the receiving state's authorities, racial identities, religious identities, and ethnicity and nationality of the country of origin. All of the descriptions mentioned above affect the cultural identity of Dominican migrants. They are visible in my material. How is it then to be a Dominican in the US? How are Dominicans regarded, are they seen as Dominicans, Latinos, blacks, or a mixture thereof and how does this reflect the self-image that these migrants have of

themselves? How is Dominican-American seen in the Dominican Republic? Should a Dominican immigrant be able to speak Spanish to be regarded a true Dominican and English to progress in the US?

These issues were debated at times overtly and sometimes inadvertently on the sites in my study. Race is a factor in integration and transnational identity formulation, especially for mostly dark-skinned Dominicans in a society such as the US, in which skin colour is regarded as a very important identity marker. The US also attaches a Latino ethnicity to people originating from Latin American countries. Questions, such as whether pan-ethnicity is something accepted and embraced by Dominicans or is it only a box to check on a census form or how do the members see the prevalent racism in the Dominican Republic that is mostly directed towards Haitians were avidly discussed.

4.7.2.1 Language as an identity marker

Dominican idioms were actively employed and discussed among migrants, as also noted by Miller and Slater (2000, 106) in their study of Trinidadians. Spanish and particularly the dialect of Spanish spoken in the Dominican Republic is a clear identity marker for Dominican migrants. Some saw the Dominican Spanish as low-class, while others defended its use fiercely. While a few members said that it should be avoided completely also in the Dominican sites examined, most agreed that, while it may not be appropriate to speak it everywhere and in all situations, in these forums Dominican Spanish was seen as something positive and something that is shared by the members. The facilitator on *Dominicans* often asked the member to recount the events of the day with a colloquial Dominican *K lo K?* [what's up] Once a member said that using such an expression is not intelligent. This sparked a long and heated conversation on the use of Dominican expressions on the site. The consensus seemed to be that such expressions are a part of Dominican identity, and can and even should be used among members in Dominican communities and the member who suggested that it is unintelligent is ignorant and ashamed of being a Dominican. However, they agreed that the idiom is not appropriate in all situations and used in the wrong ones may make the person seem uneducated. On *Dominicans* the facilitator posted a link to a newspaper article on how street language is changing the way to speak in the Dominican Republic. The captioning to the link was:

Interesting article on how Language is being changed by vernacular idioms. What do you think? Should we continue to use this and try to change our dialect? Or should we stick to pure Castillian? Dame lu' de eso :)

This incited an interesting debate on Dominican dialect and proper situations in which to use it. Generally the members seemed to agree that one should also be able to speak proper Spanish, but that among Dominicans one can speak one's own dialect or slang to which category many of the respondents seemed to place the Dominican Spanish. There were some interesting comments that tell much about the general opinion on Dominicans in these posts (emphasis added):

"...But I hate to be recognized as dominican just because of how I talk or look, especially when interacting with other cultures. ..."

"...The problem with this is that people don't know when and where to use it. I work for a non-profit agency where 99.9% of our clients are of Dominican origin. I am the only Dominican here and it embarrasses me the way these people speak..."

"People should be allowed to talk however they want, but one thing is for sure – you will be judged and treated accordingly, that's human nature!..."

"...It is important that we not belittle our 'dialect' (for lack of a better word) by categorizing all of it as slang. There are many words that we use in our culture that come from our African & indigenous roots... The same happens in English speaking countries where different countries use different words to mean the same thing and it's not considered slang, it's just regionalism"

These posts tell us that being recognized as a Dominican is often not a positive experience. Some Dominicans were embarrassed for their own dialect that they see as low-class slang and felt that by using it one deserves to be judged as uneducated. Yet in Washington Heights, home for many of the members, Dominican Spanish is the main language in the area, at homes, work and on the streets (Howard 2003b, 341).

The second-ever post in the *Dominicans in Philadelphia* site was a link to a list of Dominican expressions "El Tigueraje Dominicano". Many, if not most of the expressions were a combination of Spanish and English or translations or new spelling of English expressions, but there were also some that come from the Dominican pronunciation of Spanish. Examples include "Que cool", Shiling [chilling], ta' to' [esta todo bien, everything's all right] and tu lo ab [tú lo sabes =you know it]. The members on the sites examined also often used these expressions.

Howard (2003b, 345) found in his study that Spanish is seen as a critical link to Dominican heritage and identity. This was also supported by my findings. On *Dominicans* there was a poll on whether one is less of a Dominican if one does not speak Spanish. A majority of respondents (61%) voted yes, a few pointing out the need to understand specifically el tigueraje [nickname of Dominican Spanish]. One member said that not speaking Spanish while in the Dominican Republic does make one less of a Dominican, but not so in the US. Another member continued and said that not everyone was raised speaking Spanish but one should always try and learn it later.

Interjections of pride of being Dominican were repeated often on all of the forums examined. At first, I interpreted these exclamations as something random and irrelevant but as dozens of members posted them, I realized that they in fact have relevance. This was an opportunity to claim Dominican identity openly and proudly in a place where there were no negative repercussions or comments expected as opposed to the in their daily lives where being Dominican is not necessarily met with positive feedback by the surrounding society. There were literally dozens of different exclamations, below are few of the more common ones:

Dominicano de pura cepa! / Dominicano de sangre pura! [pure-blood Dominican]

Que viva la Quisqueya Bella! / mi país bello! / tierra Hermosa! [Long live my beautiful country]

Orgullo [pride]

Muero por mi país [I die for my country]

representing/reppin' my country

Que Bandera tan bonita [What a beautiful flag]

I love my country/Dominican Republic forever

Proud to be a Platana/Platano [plantain, (often derogatory) nickname for a Dominican]

Most often this pride was limited to being a Dominican, only rarely people express pride of being a Dominican immigrant or pride of their home in the US. There were a few positive interpolations for being from the Heights, which is the largest Dominican community in the US and the one with not a very positive reputation in the eyes of most Americans or New Yorkers.

It is, however, important not to confuse the pride of your language to not valuing good English skills. Howard (2003b, 345) found that youth in Washington Heights believed that English was not a necessary skill. However, when asked about the necessity for migrants arriving to the US to learn English 94% of the respondents on the *Dominicans* site said it is important to learn English and if one wants to progress in the society, it is absolute necessary. Few members emphasized also the need to stay close to one's roots and not forget Spanish even if learning English is important.

4.7.2.2 Ethnicity and migrant status as identity markers – Being Dominican-American

As discussed in chapter 4.6, the reputation on Dominican-Americans is not very good in the US. *Dominicans* discuss on several posts most hated Dominican stereotypes. According to the comments, Dominicans are expected to have a certain kind of a physical appearance, typically linked to African Americans, something that most Dominicans do not identify with and feel strongly about. Race as an identity marker will be discussed in 4.7.2.4. Moreover, Dominicans are considered to speak poor Spanish, something that became apparent also in the discussion above. Dominican women are often viewed as loud 'gold-diggers', while the men are seen as machos, cheaters and 'players'. But when asked of the biggest issues in holding Dominicans back in the society, the members most often also themselves listed drugs, gangs and lack of education and/or ignorance.

Stereotypes and hatred spread in many ways from one generation to the other. A member on Dominican commented how on a popular children's television program the 'bad' characters are always identified with Merengue rhythm playing on the background and therefore Dominicans are easily associated with bad behaviour. At one point a member on *Dominicans* reported that there is a Dominican hate page on Facebook "don't you just hate Dominicans" However, the page was quickly removed before any more members could access it, so this caused no more discussion. There was also a non-Dominican member who is baiting the others on *Dominicans* with provocative comments: "*Dominicans are the SHIT.*" The comments in question are completely ignored and quickly stop.

Dominican Day Parade is an example of how an existing migrant tradition gets new attention via social media. The Parade held in August is a big event in New York and has been celebrated since 1982. The event was first promoted on *Dominicans* already in March as an opportunity to meet with *Dominicans* team and MiBodega people. The parade was listed among events on Facebook and in August, there was a countdown to it on *Dominicans* counting the days as well as people participating. On August 6th, there were 8000 people that had confirmed their participation via Facebook. *Dominicans* had a 'team on the ground' during the parade that commented on the event and atmosphere. After the Parade, videos and photos were uploaded and discussions on the events that took place there. Prior to the event, the founder of *Dominicans* posted a news story on YouTube on the lack of media coverage of the event, which is one of the biggest parades in NYC. In 2010, there was no lack of media coverage, since a pregnant teenage girl was stabbed during the parade and that was all over the news, which truly angered most members, since it brought a lot of negative publicity to both Dominicans and the events.

The attempt to improve the reputation of Dominican-Americans in the US seems important, yet very challenging as stereotypes are rampant and occasional negative events get much media coverage and serve to strengthen these prejudices, even though they are not accurate when it comes to majority of Dominican-Americans. The Finnish migrants in Sweden in 1960's and 1970 suffered from a similarly bad reputation and a stereotype of a drunken and knife-wielding Finn spread in the media. It has been only during the last two decades that this stereotype has begun to fade as the second- and third generation Finnish migrants have adapted to the Swedish society. The difference between Dominican and Finnish migrants is that by appearance the Finnish migrants did not differ from the Swedish majority, whereas the Dominicans in the US do. Let us take a look at how this affects Dominicans in the US.

4.7.2.3 Pan-ethnicity as an identity marker - Dominicans as Hispanics/Latinos
Hispanics is a pan-ethnicity (see Portes & al 2007, 245) prescribed by US law to people of Latin American origin. This ethnicity is often prescribed also a shared cultural identity, Latinos and these terms are used interchangeably in various contexts. This identity emerges at times in the discussions on the sites examined. Morawska (2003,

143) found in her analysis of over a hundred studies on transnational engagement and integration that shared cultural events and joint political initiatives by Latino population represent a pan-ethnic form of immigrant assimilation. She argues that the development of Hispanic or Latino identity does not replace their sense of national/ethnic identity i.e. in this case Dominicaness, but expands and pluralizes their self-perceptions. Howard (2003b, 347) found that the Dominicans he studied clearly rejected the Latino identity – the people may have acknowledged the political and strategic use of the label but did not relate to it personally.

However, my material shows that members express more distinction on Latino identity. In some situations as can be expected, members expressed pride on Latinos when the object was a non-Dominican Latino, such as a Mexican Miss Universe or a successful athlete. Further, when support was sought from a wider community than just Dominicans members often asserted the Latino identity. When discussing racism in the US, the Latino identity becomes more pronounced, perhaps due to the fact that the surrounding society assigns this identity to Dominicans and discriminates them accordingly. Often people retold their own experiences of discrimination and racism:

"We Latinos are unwanted in USA"

"...She told me the reason I didn't get the job was because I sound too Latina and my English isn't American enough..."

Networks and sites aimed at Latino audience in general seemed to receive less interest than the ones directed specifically at Dominicans. On *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* a member posted a link to a new social network for Latinos called Tecomento.es. This post received no reaction from other members. *Dominicans* posted a link to another Latino site and received one "Orgullosamente Latina" [proudly Latina] interjection and 21 people liking it, but no other reactions. Yet there was a clear effort by some to get the other participants to recognize their Latino identity as well. There were situations, where Dominicans' achievements are described as representations on Latinos in general. *Dominicans* facilitator comments in connection with a poll on whether one who does not speak Spanish is less of a Dominican.

"It's important to always remember even though we are Dominicans never lose sight that we fall under the Latino bracket! We are Dominicans pero somos Latinos Tambien!"
[we are also Latinos]

A member comments on troubles that arose at Dominican festival in Boston:

"Us Latinos need to stick together instead of fighting each other."

A member saw the lack of solidarity between Latinos as the number one reason to prevent the Dominicans from moving forward in the society.

"Latinos are the only race where we always discriminate against each another..."

Most often recognition of Latino identity was done in connection with cultural events; perhaps it is easier to find common ground on a more specific level, such as music or literature. This was also evidenced by the US Latino media, Spanish-language television and radio channels and Spanish-language newspapers that find an audience even though they do not profile their programs for just one or two nationalities but instead towards the entire Latino group. *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* was the site that promoted Latin American cultural events and a shared Latino culture. Several members, both institutional and individual introduced Latino artists visiting Miami. When customs and celebrations were examined, the Latino identity was not as obvious, for example, the *Dominicans* facilitator asked whether the members planned to celebrate Cinco de Mayo that is observed in the United States as a celebration of Mexican heritage and pride. While some members celebrated to support 'their Mexican brothers', many said that they just use it as an excuse to party and around 25% state that they are not Mexicans, so they see no reason to celebrate, some even being very offensive about it. There is also a national Hispanic heritage month celebrated in the US since 1968. Most people said they will celebrate it by eating and drinking traditional Dominican foods and drinks, by dancing and listening to Dominican music. The members also emphasized their Dominican identity in discussing this event, not one comment included the word Latino.

Luis Guarnizo & Michael Peter Smith (1998, 23-24) found in their research on Ticuanense migrants in New York that while they were marginalized by mainstream society, they recreated an essentialized group identity and positioned themselves as racially superior to their Puerto Rican and African-American neighbours. I found relatively little evidence of such in the discussions on these sites, not even towards

Haitians and Puerto Ricans that are generally seen as 'dearest enemies' for Dominicans. When *Dominicans in New York* asked whether its members would attend Puerto Rican day parade, the few respondents just commented that there will be too many people out there. On *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* a Puerto Rican restaurant was being advertised without any negative commenting. There were even many participants that have ancestry in both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Some small jibes do appear, for example, *Dominicans in Philadelphia* facilitator expressed his disappointment at the fact that the local Puerto Ricans had more members in their site than the Dominicans.

We letting "Boricuas" win, I can't believe this, not one post in the pages wall. Smh disappointed"

Very commonly, Dominicans' attitude towards Haitians is negative, even hostile, which seems to derive from both history and policies of distinction. Yet any evidence that this negative attitude is directed at Haitian migrants in the US was difficult to find. This complex relationship between Haitians and Dominicans is discussed more in the following chapter as it relates closely with the Dominican racial identity.

4.7.2.4 Race as an identity marker - Dominicans as blacks

La raza [race] as understood by most Dominicans has a broad meaning. Howard (2003b) suggests that it has notions of nationality and culture and can be understood as a concept of belonging. Therefore, the blunt racial categorizations used in the US often pose problems to the Dominican immigrants' view of identity. Dominicans have a more fluid concept of race and very rarely identify themselves as black or mulatto, but instead use the term indio [Indian] which in the Dominican context has a broader meaning that cannot directly be transferred to the US racist discourse. (Ibid. 337-339) As Portes & al (2007, 246) note, Dominican Republic is a predominantly mix-race country, with a white upper class that does not emigrate. Therefore, in the US most Dominican migrants are generally regarded as part of the black population, which often prevents full integration in the American system that is still racially stratified and a person is regarded as either black or white with no shades in between (Itzigsohn & al 1999, 336).

Many Dominican migrants retain a pejorative view of African ancestry (Howard 2003a, 72) as the state ideology is based on what Silvio Torres-Saillant (1998) refers to as 'negrophobic discourse', something that derives from Trujillo's policies and even further back, from the Haitian-Dominican relationship in the 19th century. There is a popular myth that Dominican ancestry is predominately European and indigenous and the role of these is often exaggerated (Howard 2003b, 343).

Race is a topic that raised clearly the most heated discussion on the forums examined. A member on *Dominicans* pointed out that in Dominican Cedula [ID-card], which contains information on race, there is no option for negro [black], the alternative offered is indio. *Dominicans in New York* discussed it when one of its members wanted to know how Dominicans felt about blacks, whether they have African ancestors and consider themselves Afro-Latino? Roughly one third of the respondents avoided answering the question and said that they are a part of the human race or that it does not matter. Little less than a third recognized African ancestry and a couple identified themselves as black. The remaining part emphasized that Dominicans are a mixture of white, Taino and black, thus identifying with the concept of Indio that is still promoted by the Dominican government. The largest and most profound discussions took place on *Dominicans* in connection with the US Census. In the census forms, there are questions on the race and ethnicity of the respondent.²³ A member on *Dominicans* wanted to know the opinion of her fellow members on how they describe their race and ethnicity on those forms. This incited a long and active discussion and the topic was revisited on several occasions. The discussion eventually became very heated, mainly because there was an African-American person without Dominican heritage involved in the conversation and he saw the race as an absolute, as a first defining factor of a person's identity and as almost all Dominican migrants have at least some black ancestry and share a similar history, they should according to him therefore describe themselves as blacks and nothing else.

²³ The form requests everyone to answer following two questions: is person x (for each member of household) Spanish/Hispanic/Latino with separate boxes for Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican and Cuban. The rest are requested to fill in their own group. Next question is what is person x's race including alternatives for White, Black/African American/Negro, American Indian/Alaska native (include name of tribe), seven different alternatives for Asian race, four for Pacific Islanders or as a last alternative some other race (print race). The Census form can be found at <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/pdf/d-61b.pdf> Accessed 20 Jan 2012

"Being black is not just a skin colour but it is what a person is, it is how God made you..."

"Me being a Black American and you being a Dominican we both went through the same thing: slavery, working in sugar plantations. ...White people don't want the black race come together and that is why they give different labels [Latino/Hispanic] to confuse us..."

"...After the Haitians revolted against slave owners, white Spaniards did not want the black in the DR to revolt against them and told them that they have white and Taino Indian ancestry. It is about mental enslavement..."²⁴

This reasoning did not fall well with Dominicans on the site. They commented how the US still focuses too much on race. Later, when the issue was revisited in connection with a reminder by the facilitators to fill in the Census form, a member reminded all Dominicans to check three boxes: White, Black/African and American Indian with Taino as the tribe. She then added:

"The US 2010 Census still doesn't recognize that America is an entire huge continent divided into North, Central, the Caribbean and South. They only count Native Americans/Indians as just from North America, they have forgotten about Tainos, Caribs, Incans Mayans, Chibchas, Quechuas, Aymaras, etc. So Latinos, wherever you come from, don't forget to mention your Native American tribe origin."

This provoked the opponent into commenting:

"...Why do you claim blood that was raped into you by the Spaniards? Not all Dominicans are mixed with Taino either... People should start to realize who we are ... and show some unity. ... By culture we are different but by race we are all brothers and sisters"

A Dominican member reiterated that it is important to mention Taino as the US still ignores indigenous peoples from Latin America. Another member commented that:

"raped into us" is a broad and incendiary statement and that not every colony has the same history.

The discussion then went on with the African-American member blaming the Dominicans for denying their history and the Dominicans replying that Dominican history is more than just that and that there have been many generations since the slavery, during which the mixing has occurred.

"There are no less than 517 long years on history on our island. Of course there are similarities with our cousins across the Caribbean and African Diaspora but I can say that there is more to Dominican Republic's diverse background than Spanish Blood been "raped into us"..."

Another member continued by commenting that the Africans themselves sold African slaves to Europeans and added:

²⁴ As a part of my decision to avoid direct quotes in sensitive issues, the comments related to race were slightly altered by shortening, changing the word order and spelling. However, every effort was made to keep the original meaning intact.

"... We know our history and we don't deny being Native American (Taino), being European by our conquerors and being African by the slaves...It seems you know NOTHING about Latino/Hispanic cultures, especially Dominican. ... How the US culture deals with this FACT is not the only way to deal with it. And why not claim a heritage that is a historical fact? ..."

The opponent retorted by referring to Mendel's law on Black skin colour being dominant and that Dominicans should not refer to themselves as Latinos as it is a European term referring to Italians.

When the issue was revisited for the third time, it was captioned by the facilitator with a comment from Voto Latino [An NGO encouraging Latinos to vote in the US].

"... By identifying as Hispanic/Latino data is used to fund state and local governments for special programs such as bilingual education. It is important to understand that the Census views Latinos as an ethnic, and not a racial group. ... Race is used to implement many federal laws such as the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. It is used to map out congressional districts and also used to assess the fairness of employment practices, monitor racial disparities in health and education, and plan accordingly"

This starts up the conversation again and the African-American member comments that he thinks it is interesting to see what Dominicans think about race.

In my view I don't see why that is so confusing, when I look in the mirror I see a Black man. ..."

This time there were also new members arguing with the opponent and they used somewhat different approach:

"...race is not discussed or defined as it is in the US."

"Painting with a broad brush is a sad form of white supremacy. Instead of taking each peoples on their own cultural terms you want to put them into racial brackets convenient to your own perspective. ...Just because we share heritage from the African continent does not mean we are all the same no more than being from Europe makes German and Italian the same. ... We come from a culture that operates outside a simple two "race" dichotomy"

The issue was not settled and it seems to be because the members discuss the issue with different definitions. Dominicans really see race as something more than just genealogy or skin colour whereas the African-American member saw it from the dichotomized vantage point dominating the US discourse. On the other hand, despite several comments claiming that no one discounts the African American heritage, it was evident that the pejorative view persists and that Spanish and especially the Taíno heritage were exaggerated by the Dominican members. Spain was at times referred to

as *"La madre patria - Mother country"*. At the arrival of Columbus there may have been several hundred thousand Taínos living on Hispaniola, but by 1570 there were only a few hundred left. The population had been decimated and even though intermarriage was fairly common between Spaniards and the women of the Taíno elite, not many Dominicans can truly claim Taíno heritage today. (Higman 2011, 75-77)

In the end it is not analytically important whether the discourse in the forums on racial background and Dominican ethnicity is actually true and based on historical facts. What is important is that this discourse does have a profound effect on the self-image and identity and also practical implications in the lives of the participants. As states Hall (1999): "identities emerge out of translating 'me' into stories". Identities are affected by the way we are represented and by the way we present ourselves. (Ibid, 250-251) The dominant discourse is that most Dominicans have, in addition to black and white, also indigenous roots and there is a strong will to emphasize this. Indigenous ancestry is in this discourse seen as something positive and it is felt to be wrong of the US to ignore the indigenous South American peoples and their progeny in the Census. This conflicts seriously with the dominant discourse in the US, causing conflicting identity markers among Dominican immigrants. In other words, it is a negotiation about fitting in or not in the categories for self-identification imposed by the surrounding society.

Race and racism in the Dominican Republic

The history between Haiti and Dominican Republic is bloody. After Haiti gained its independence from France in 1804, it wanted to reunite the island under one rule to ensure its continued independence. As Dominican Republic became independent from Spain in 1821, Haiti invaded the country and from 1822 to 1844 the island was unified. Even after 1844, Haiti made several attempts to regain control causing the relationship between the two countries to be strained. Later the occupation has been used as a political weapon by Dominican politicians depicting it as a period of repression and savagery. During the era of Trujillo, Dominicans were defined as a Hispanic nation, with mainly European and 'Indian' heritage and essentially different from Haiti. He pursued a policy of 'Dominicandad' which eventually in 1937 led to a massacre of more than

20,000 Haitians in the Dominican Republic (Higman 2011, 205). Today there is a sizeable Haitian minority in the Dominican Republic, with a large part living there without legal status. Old antagonisms with Haiti are quick to resurface even living as migrants in the US where the society considers both to be part of the same group - blacks or possibly Caribbean migrants. According to a relatively balanced historical analysis of the Dominican-Haitian relations by a pseudonym Jalisco Lancer that was posted on *Dominicans*²⁵, to be Dominican is above all else not to be a Haitian. The analysis received heavy criticism:

"...The writer missed a lot of true information about the history of the conflict between the Dominican Republic and Haiti...I detest to read garbage of people that don't do proper research before writing. This article is a piece of...yes that!"

"to put this gently this piece is shit! this man has little to no understanding of Dominican history."

Some members thought it to be interesting and saw that it opened some new avenues of thought and brought something that was missing from the history:

"... enough of the conquer and divide tactics that have pitted Dominicans and Haitians against each other..."

"[link to an alternative article on the issue]...I think the conflict between Dominicans and Haitians are a result of political agendas, foreign policy terms, self-hate and also more so the sense of racial superiority"

The UN Human Rights Council published a report²⁶ on racism in the Dominican Republic, in which it was concluded that there is "a profound and entrenched problem of racism and discrimination in Dominican society, generally affecting blacks and particularly such groups as black Dominicans, Dominicans of Haitian descent and Haitians. The dominant perception among most Dominicans is that their mulatto skin tones distinguish them from darker-skinned Dominicans and Haitians. The experts noted that the issue of racism is almost invisible in certain parts of society and in particular amongst elites who vehemently deny the possibility of the existence of such a phenomenon." *Dominicans* posted a link to a newspaper article commenting how this report had been rejected in the Dominican Republic asking the members to comment whether they thought that there in fact was racism in the DR. Roughly 40% of the members that replied either denied the existence of racism, belittled the

²⁵ The analysis can also be found elsewhere online. See for example Ae AllEmpires Online History Community at http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=conflict_haiti_dominican Accessed 20 Jan 2012

²⁶ The report can be found in <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/117/66/PDF/G0811766.pdf?OpenElement> Accessed 20 Jan 2012

phenomenon, defended it by saying that there is racism everywhere or commented that there is racism, but it is *well-deserved* as Haitians are criminals that abuse the good will of the Dominicans. Interestingly some of these comments came from same members that had just a few weeks earlier criticized the US for its narrow racial definitions. The rest of the comments admitted that there is serious racism in the DR and admonished the other members for their ignorant comments.

"...all that come from years and years of ignorant hate passed down from generations..."

"Aqui hay mucha ignoracia...nunca hay razon para ser racista..." [There is a lot of ignorance here...there is never a reason to be a racist]

"...it is sad but a lot of our people have never progressed from the Trujillo mentality in terms of how we view Haitians and how we try to whitewash our own history and culture..."

"There is a lot of racism in DR, not only with the Haitians but also with dark skin (Morenos) Dominican citizens..."

Many Dominican-American migrants did not see the racism in the Dominican Republic or saw it as somehow acceptable. Yet any evidence that this negative attitude is directed at Haitian migrants in the US was difficult to find on in my data. This does not necessarily imply that these attitudes do not exist also towards the Haitian migrants in the US, just that this attitude was not present on the sites examined.

4.8 Practices and characteristics typical for a virtual community

Wellman & Gulia's (1999, 335-356) conceptualization of virtual communities was introduced in chapter 3.4.3. It centres around seven concepts. Analyzing my material I will in the following answer these seven questions proposed by Wellman & Gulia.

1) Are online relationships narrow and specialized and what support is available?

The online groups studied were not narrow and were in principle open to all. Even if members were in practice mostly Dominicans or people that have Dominican relatives and people interested in Dominican culture, groups were still rather heterogeneous as the members came from very different circumstances and the forums offered a wide variety of topics for discussion. Wellman and Gulia (1999, 338) found that even groups that are not designed to be supportive tend to be just that. Group members seek companionship, support and a sense of belonging. As can be seen from the analysis

above, this holds true even in those groups I studied. The groups offered support when requested and had a feeling of community and belonging. Some forums did this more actively such as *Dominicans and Dominicans in New York*, while others had a more ad hoc approach to the support offered.

2) What effects do the weaker relationships on the internet have?

The internet can open new modes and forms of communality that are not bound by the same structures and hierarchies as are local communities based on the physical proximity of its members (Kupiainen 352-353 & 357; Davydova 2006, 46; Mitra 2000, 677-678). Urmila Goel (2005, 19), while studying second-generation Indians in Germany on an online forum found that the forum worked almost independently of offline hierarchies and dominant discourses. Levitt and Nyberg Sørensen (2004, 8) point out that family and kinship links, even though they do provide a support network can also be experienced as a source of continuous obligations. This was also mentioned in my data, as a member felt the pressure of sending remittances as an obstacle for advancement in the US. The groups in social network sites provide a way to express belonging to the community of country of origin, without having to feel the pressures that the migrant community hierarchies or familial contacts sometimes create. It was a way to reinforce Dominican identity and overcome physical distance by sharing events and news with people with similar experiences also in situations where no such opportunity existed offline. Members from states such as Alaska, Hawaii or Oregon or countries like Sweden could communicate with other Dominicans, even if the Dominican communities where they live were non-existent. The effects of the community were also informational: the members appreciated the wide variety of information available on the sites on both history and modern-day Dominican Republic along with relevant information from the new home communities

When it comes to migration, virtual connections can have an added benefit. Active participation in the virtual communities on the internet can free migrants from the confined feeling of living in the margins of the receiving society. These communities can act as a kind of a 'new tribe' that does not entail absolute commitment. The internet as a public space is pervaded by power but with the strong presence of the

private, it also diffuses and questions power. It is a forum open for all, also those marginal individuals and communities that cannot get their voice heard elsewhere in the space of a nation-state. (Davydova 2006, 46) The internet enables migrants to express themselves in a context where they do not have to confront the same marginalization and invisibility that migrants from the developing world often face in the Western world. They were able to communicate with others that were not unfamiliar with and indifferent towards the history and realities that affected them. (Bernal 2006, 168) This was also apparent in the groups I studied where they were able to discuss history from a viewpoint of Dominicans and Dominican-Americans without having to explain and justify their views to others that do not have similar backgrounds.

3) Is there reciprocity and attachment in virtual communities?

Davydova (2006, 51), concluded in her study about the suomi.ru, that the group participants experience a relatively real sense of community, not so much virtual or anonymous. I found the same experience on some of the groups I studied. There was much reciprocity, especially on the most active sites *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York*. Majority of posts started a discussion of some kind, often not just the other members but also the facilitators participating in the discussions. *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* also showed signs of attachment between the participants, even though the discussions were not as active. It was a smaller community with a significant part of members involved in cultural activities that enabled feeling of a community.

4) Are strong relationships possible online?

Strong relationships can be possible online, although that is not very likely on the forums I studied. When members wish to deepen their relationship it is likely that their communication moves on to other forums, such as private messaging via Facebook, e-mail, chat or offline. There is evidence in my material that this happened also among some members in the groups I studied.

5) How does online community affect face-to-face community involvement?

The forums encouraged to offline interaction in differing degrees. All of them offered opportunities to promote events and especially inform on events organized by the members or facilitators of these sites. They offered a forum to establish or promote civic activism that can take also offline forms. Predominantly *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York* encouraged also voting and other political participation and involvement in the surrounding society. *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* mostly concentrated on cultural events offline, creating community involvement in the cultural field.

6) Does virtuality increase diversity of a community?

Virtuality increased the diversity of all of these communities, some of which could really not even exist in other than virtual form. Particularly *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook* and *Dominicans* had members from all around the world and also others had members from multiple and geographically distant locations. In addition to the geographical diversity, there was also generational diversity. Even though majority of members were young adults, there were members from early teens up to migrants that arrived in the US during the early days of Dominican migration in the 1970's. The members came from varied backgrounds, some came from tightly-knit Dominican communities in the Heights or in Miami, while others lived in situations where there was practically no Dominican or Latino community to speak of. The members had differing economic and educational level and their legal status varied from undocumented entries to student visas, green cards and US citizenship. All this brought rather lot diversity into the forums under study and brought variety and differences of opinion to the discussions.

7) Are virtual communities 'real' communities?

Not all virtual communities are 'real'. At the time of my study (2010) I would say that two of the groups studied could be seen as 'real' communities, namely *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York*. *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* felt at the time being more like a one-way channel for information, it held clearly most ads and promotions and least discussions among members. The site can have a future as a local cultural information channel and from that it can grow into a local migrant cultural community. The other

two groups have some of the features of a community, but need to invest more time and effort in creating the sense of community. Methods include recruiting more members or, more importantly, posting more and encouraging discussions by participating in them more often. Simple procedures, such as posting news and other items captioned with a question (how do you feel, what do you think, what your experiences in the matter are, and so on) and sharing the mundane would help in making the members more active. That would help to create the much-needed reciprocity.

4.8.1 Establishing boundaries

For the sites I studied, establishing boundaries was not as important as the participants were for the most part expected to share a Dominican migrant identity that created a 'natural' boundary to the groups. The members were expected to have some shared customs and values, memories and other links that helped in creating a sense of communality that otherwise could have been challenging to establish in online communities. There were plenty of references to Dominican historical events or persons, places were referred to by nicknames or area codes, there were posts of incidents or customs that occur regularly in the Dominican Republic or the migrant communities or families. Even though these 'natural' boundaries did exist, still some boundaries were also created by using a shared communicative style as suggested by Sveningsson (2001, 160-163). A mixture of English and Spanish was used, often with spelling derived from Dominican Spanish, which made some discussions at times challenging to follow for an outsider. On *Dominicans* there were a few discussions on the language use. At times the use of Spanglish was clearly intentional, especially when talking about the events of the day.

"hitting the libros hard before el fin of the semester"

"Vamos acer un BBQ n eat left over Habichuelas con dulce lol"

Davydova (2006, 48) found in her studies that no one is particular of spelling and grammar when writing to online sites and that was true also on the sites that I studied. The spelling was careless, at times on purpose reflecting the spoken language; at times it was apparent that not all members could spell correctly. This was true both for English as well as Spanish.

Another way of creating boundaries was the way in which the membership base on the sites was expanded. Knowledge of the groups spreads through pre-existing social ties as noted by Adams Parham (2004, 214). This held true also for the sites I studied. Existing members were encouraged to invite their Dominican friend to the communities. Most active in this was *Dominicans*: Every Sunday there was a post urging the members to invite five new friends to the site. This was very popular and almost always prompted positive replies and resulted in dozens of new members. As the groups have grown, the diversity of their members has increased and the pre-existing social ties have less of a boundary effect.

4.8.2 *Social order and control*

The facilitators of the sites examined imposed order and control. *Dominicans* was the only site that had a code of conduct posted on its information page, but also other sites warned members about inappropriate language and when needed, removed posts. Mediation was the most often used method of social control. When somebody posted ignorant comments, the facilitators or other members usually corrected the member, advised her/him to get the facts straight usually in a very courteous manner and could even point to appropriate sources on where to get the information. However, it was not always as polite as this. Sometimes warnings, removing of comments and even expulsion were needed to regain control against troublemakers.

On *Dominicans* the facilitators posted a notification:

"Some on you may have noticed that there was an individual who recently joined the group and was pretty much dissing us etc trying to be funny. The persons comments have been deleted and has been reported. They have been banned."

This raised several positive responses; it appears that some members had found the comments truly offensive. Unfortunately I was not able to see the original comments as they had been deleted by the time I gathered my data. A few months later *Dominicans* facilitator posted a reminder:

"We understand a lot of the topics we post on this network may be touchy to some but we urge you to be respectful to one another in order to have important and intelligent discussion. If you haven't had a chance to view our comments policy please view them by clicking above on the About us Dominicans Tab. Failure to comment within these guidelines will have their comments DELETED and if necessary both FLAGGED [reported

forward] and BANNED. This is the last thing we'd like to do let's just keep it civil. Thank You :)"

Members also imposed control on each other. Inappropriate comments were often commented by other members and called ignorant and bad behaviour was reported to the facilitators and occasionally even to the Facebook controlling mechanisms. Baiting comments insulting Dominicans were usually just ignored and the member posting them was ostracized. On *Donde estan los Dominicanos de Faceook*, a member used very rude an expression in English, which got immediate comments from the facilitator as well as some other members. The person using inappropriate language refused to admit she was being impolite and told the commentator to "*shut up*". She was advised to use Google translator to check the meaning of the expression she used. After that she insisted that she was only kidding and the discussion returned to normal language use. It appeared that the rudeness truly was unintentional. These examples show how the social control of the sites functions.

5 Summing up and conclusions

In this final chapter I will summarize the findings of the study by once more going through my research questions. The focus rests on issues of transnationalism, identity and implications of community. Secondly and as a conclusion, I will link my study to a wider context: I will discuss the potential that migrants and virtual transnational communities in the social media can offer.

5.1 What kinds of topics are discussed at the different sites?

5.1.1 What topics create a lot of discussion?

A wide array of topics was discussed on the sites studied. I chose to look at these topics through the framework of economic, political, social and cultural transnational issues. Although a driving force behind migration, economic topics received less attention due to the nature of the media. Political and cultural items were very popular. Also social aspects were discussed and couple of the sites themselves proved to be examples of social transnational practices. Shared experiences and sharing everyday life events was an important part of the discussions and of social transnational practices creating the feeling of a community.

5.1.2 Are the issues discussed about the Dominican Republic and the current home different?

Sarah Mahler (1998, 93) points out that very little attention is given to the role of transnational migrants in the host communities. Yet they can be a very important part of that community. This is specifically the case of Dominicans in the Heights and increasingly also elsewhere. *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York* present excellent examples of groups whose intention it is to influence also the host community and the US society and to activate its members to act as agents of change where they are living. The issues talked about the Dominican Republic and the new home communities did differ even though some topics were common for both. Economic discussions cover transnational enterprises and other topics that concern both countries. Diasporic tourism and home country investments relate to the Dominican Republic, while labour market discussions concentrated on the US, perhaps indicating the lack of interest or at least lack of concrete plans to return to the Dominican Republic in the near future.

Political discussions on the Dominican Republic most often centred on issues of distrust: corruption, impunity, insecurity, and human rights violations. Also discussions on party politics and party allegiance related mainly to the Dominican political life. Discussions related to US politics often featured immigration issues and Dominican-Americans in politics. Civic activism and elections were discussed in context of both nations. The sites included social practices and shared experiences from both countries, in that way creating a feeling of virtual co-presence in both societies. Cultural practices concentrated on Dominican cultural features, such as dance, film, folklore, food, literature, music, and theatre. In the context of the US, the presence of these Dominican cultural features in the new home communities was noted with positive responses and the success of Dominican-Americans also elsewhere in US cultural life was celebrated. Discussions on race and racism, even though in few occasions raised in connection to Haitians in the Dominican Republic, focused on the life in the US, where the Dominicans often are face racism themselves as they are categorized as blacks against their own conceptions in the matter. Pan-ethnicity was discussed exclusively in the context of the US. Also the language issues focused on the US and Dominicans in the US. The emphasis of this discussion lay on bilingualism. It was considered important to know English in order to progress in the local society as well as Spanish to maintain linkages to Dominican cultural heritage.

5.2 Do the discussions reflect the transnational identity construction?

5.2.1 How does 'Dominicanness' appear in the discussions?

Hall (1999, 223 & 250-254) argues that identities are affected by and contain elements of the external – the context in which we live and people we interact with, they are formed within a discourse. On these sites Dominicanness appeared in many ways in the discussion. The uppermost sentiment on these sites was the pride of being a Dominican. It was the dominant discourse on identity on the sites examined, and as elsewhere in the society the categories for self-identification are often imposed upon Dominicans, here they could and did define their own Dominican identity with the identity markers they saw as relevant. This identity was structured around language, historical, ethnic and racial identity markers that form the core of the Dominican identity. That was reflected in cultural practices such as particularly food, music, dance

and literature. It was also reflected in social practices in shared experiences that are typical to specifically Dominicans.

Nyberg Sørensen (1998, 246) maintains that for transnational migrants several identity narratives are in competition. Dominicaness in these sites was seen through specific Dominican-American viewpoint and clearly contained transnational identity markers and other influences and was reflected in transnational practices. The identity markers that most obviously contain transnational aspects were ethnic and racial. The pan-ethnicity is an identity marker that is not visible in identity construction in the Dominican Republic, as was also apparent here as there were no discussions on Latino identity related to the island. The imposed racial identity of the Dominican migrants in the US, where the surrounding society sees them as blacks or black Latinos is very interesting as it conflicts with the racial constructions of the Dominican Republic, where the majority defines themselves as Indios. How the Dominican racial identity was negotiated among Dominican members and towards outsiders presented a fascinating window into the Dominican transnational identity construction. Dominican-American culture and shared social practices, politics and to a lesser degree also economic aspects all formed a part of the Dominicaness that was constructed on these sites.

Electronic media has had a significant impact on migration by prompting, spreading and facilitating the translocal and transnational way of life and cultural hybridization (Appadurai 1996, 7-11 & Hall 1999, 61-67). Nyberg Sørensen (1998, 256) concludes that migration has become such a common Dominican reality that mass culture and popular culture in the Dominican Republic have become immersed with bi-national symbols. Social and cultural transnational migrant practices are therefore changing the Dominicaness, not only for Dominican migrants but also for Dominicans in the Dominican Republic. The cultural hybridization was evident on the sites examined through the many Dominican artists performing in the US and the Dominican-American artists celebrated in the Dominican Republic. Unfortunately very few Dominicans residing on the island participated in these groups that there were

practically no discussion among members on how they see the bi-national symbols in the cultural life on the island.

5.2.2 Are common characteristics for virtual communities apparent?

As discussed in the previous chapter, all of the sites examined had some features from virtual communities, some more than others. None of the groups studied were narrow or specialized – a wide array of topics are covered. The member bases are very diverse enabling connections that would not be available offline. Particularly *Dominicans* and *Dominicans in New York* had managed to create reciprocity and feelings of attachment by active posting and encouraging sharing of the mundane. Even though the relationships on the forums were so-called weak ties, the ties served a purpose in lives of the members in a way that stronger familial or offline connections often cannot offer as they bring more financial burdens, obligations and pressures to additional time used in communication and certain behavioural expectations that do not exist in these ‘new tribes’ formed around voluntary relationships. These groups for Dominican migrants had natural boundaries, and they were accentuated by the language use on the sites. The groups imposed social order and control not only by the facilitator, but also members levied controls for improper language use or for ignorant commenting.

5.2.3 Are there any features common for migrant communities present and how do they function in the virtual context?

Anderson (1983) concluded that nations are ‘imagined communities’ and Thompson (2009, 362) argued that all communities are imagined communities. Migrant communities exist because people believe in them. The migrants turn to each other for companionship, social support and information because they believe that there is a sense of belonging among the fellow migrants, engendering a sense of community thus making the community real. The Dominican migrant communities in the US certainly do exist offering support and information enabling continued migration flows. Monica Boyd (1989, 641) argues that migration flows often become self-sustaining due to networks of information, assistance and obligations that developed between migrants and their relatives and friends back home. This is true for Dominicans in the US. The migration has achieved a critical mass and they are creating a shared, collective transnational experience as argued by Levitt (2001). The groups I studied

each attempted to create a sense of community, some succeeding better than others. However, the groups are virtual and not based on obligations but on voluntary involvement. Yet even they offer assistance, support and companionship, although at the time not very much of this was requested. Evidently members saw the groups as something reliable to turn to in need of assistance and more often than not, help was offered, either by the facilitators or by other members.

When talking about a shared transnational experience, it is important to remember that not all migrants from the same country are the same. Migrants are a heterogeneous group that possess distinct personal and social endowments, come from different circumstances and profess regional cultural differences. (Guarnizo & Smith 1998, 14) This became evident when following the discussions on the sites. Members were predominantly young and urban and often more educated than the average Dominican migrant, yet they formed a community together with elder members, members living outside areas where most Dominicans are concentrated such as in Alaska, Hawaii, California or in other countries. Second-generation migrants discuss politics and culture together with first-generation political refugees. In a virtual community where the members discuss on equal footing despite their differing backgrounds is a richness that allows different opinions to be voiced. The dominant discourse arises based on the discussions and not given from above, even though the role of the facilitator is central.

Nowadays it is understood that maintaining strong linkages to the country of origin and incorporating in the receiving community is not a contradictory process but they can reinforce each other (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004 & Portes & al 1999). Levitt and Jaworsky (2007, 127) noted that it is often the same actors that engage in politics in both countries. On the sites studied, same members were interested in politics of the Dominican Republic as well as those of the US. Earlier studies have found that migrants can affect voting decisions of their relatives living on the island as they are often considered better informed. This was supported by posts on the *Dominicans* site where some members concluded that it is up to the migrants to save the nation. However, as long as most migrants saw the entire Dominican political field as corrupt

and do not see any viable alternatives, the chance of causing any true change via the electoral system is limited. Political civic activism promoted on these sites can at this juncture have more direct consequences as, when a campaign is successfully launched and the public and the media spreads the story, it forces the government officials to take action. These campaigns can very well be launched online on these existing communities by the initiative of active members or facilitators.

Transnational lifestyle is possible even without actual physical movement across national borders. Apart from occasional vacationing in the Dominican Republic, I found very little evidence of movement across national borders by the members. Of course many of the members had crossed the border when migrating, but that may have occurred years earlier or perhaps in most cases even by the previous generation. Yet the transnational lifestyle was apparent even among members who have never lived in the Dominican Republic. The lifestyle became apparent on posts on social and cultural practices, most notably in discussing celebrations, food and music, but also on posts related to politics and economics, where political issues of both countries raised heated conversations or, for example, as ads enabling transnational communications such as travel or telecom appeared on the sites. It is clear that at least on these sites most members had limited social relations to the country of origin yet they actively assert their identification to that particular group, therefore falling into the 'belonging' rather than 'being' category on the transnational social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). So far most Dominican-origin migrants recognize their background and claim Dominican identity but how will this be in the future? The discussions on the sites imply that living transnationally has indeed become the norm among most members and, as new Dominicans keep arriving, the generational mix in different age groups helps to maintain the transnational lifestyle and identities.

Benítez (2006, 188) found in his study among Salvadoran migrants in Washington DC that access to the internet, the connections there between the diaspora and homeland and the Spanish-language media available there forms a new kind of transnational social space. The immigrants use new technologies and create their own popular narratives and socio-cultural representations on cyberspace. They construct powerful

connections that Benítez labels cybercommunities. Migrants integrate media texts and new technologies in reproducing and negotiating collective identities in the transnational social space. (Karim 2003, 13-15) The virtual communities examined created their own narratives as to the Dominican identity and community and retold and reinforced the existing Dominican interpretations of history, race and identity in an environment where those interpretations are ignored or disqualified. They also created their narratives on the social and political realities of the Dominican Republic that were reflected through the perspective of a migrant. The role of media was important particularly in relation to political debates as most discussions on the sites were initiated with a link to a topical newspaper article or online news report.

Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004, 115) conclude that internet communication can help establish and sustain socio-cultural networks that provide sociability, support, information and sense of belonging. This is imperative in diaspora communities. As Robert C. Smith (1998, 213-214) points out, technology facilitates the emergence of a sense of simultaneity. This enables migrants to have an on-going participation in both host community as well as the community of origin. This on-going participation was evident in my data. Sense of belonging was apparent on all the sites examined, and constant opportunities for sociability were offered by the three most active ones. All the groups shared relevant information on the Dominican Republic and all those facilitated from the US offered information also on the communities of current residence. Support was offered when it was requested, although thus far there were not very many examples of this present.

Many important features of migrant communities appear on the groups examined. Some of them are enhanced in or enabled by a virtual context that allows for co-presence in several contexts, activating, supporting and reinforcing the Dominican identity of their members. What are the benefits of such an environment and how can it be used in a development context? I will discuss that in my concluding remarks.

5.3 Concluding remarks

I will in the following examine the linkage between migration and development and discuss how the social media networks can be employed in strengthening this linkage. Migration and development are linked in many ways – through the mobile livelihood strategies of individuals, households and communities, through remittances, investments by migrants and transnational communities and through the international mobility associated with global integration, inequality and insecurity (Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen (2004, 3). On the migration-development nexus migrants are seen as a development resource. Migrant transnationalism is an important phenomenon with high growth prospective that can have a significant impact on both immigrant adaptation in the receiving communities and on the development prospects of the sending nation (Portes 2001, 181). Nyberg Sørensen (1998, 263) points out that in addition to economic resources, the transnational migrants bring new and multi-faceted world views and experiences, from, for example, feminist, social, political and racial movements. Social remittances can be understood as ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that migrants bring to their communities of origin. They can be both positive and negative varying from ideas about democracy and gender equality to rising materialism and individualism. From a development viewpoint, social remittances are an under-utilized resource, which could be used more in improving socio-economic wellbeing in both sending and receiving communities. (Levitt & Nyberg Sørensen 2004, 8)

Why are migrant communities or migrant networks important? Vertovec (2009, 39) describes how migration is a process that depends on and creates social networks. Charles Tilly (1990, 84) maintains that the effective units of migration are not individuals or households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship and work experience. Communities are therefore vital for continued migration and are essential to the adjustment of new migrants in the host country, by assisting e.g. in finding employment and accommodation. Also, as discussed previously, communities are crucial in order to maintain the loyalties of emigrants, something which is important especially to developing countries at a national, community and individual level.

Return ideology, or a myth of return is typical for Caribbean migrants and has according to Conway & Potter (2007, 29) become institutionalized as a multi-generational phenomenon. Hybridity and living between two worlds is built into the narratives, traditions and nostalgic reminiscences.

Social media is still a relatively new phenomenon but I believe that it is here to stay in one form or another. Social media has a lot of untapped potential when it comes to transnational migrant communication and communities. Social media can be used in intra-diaspora communication, as the groups examined did to provide sociability, support, information, sense of belonging and identity. As discussed, the role of support could be more extensive than was apparent in the groups I studied. Social media can also be used in inter-diaspora communication, for instance Latinos or immigrants in a certain area or around certain issues, such as the dream act or the campaign against the Arizona immigration bill showed. It can even be used in diaspora-home communication between the country of origin government or communities and the migrants at an individual or migrant community level. Social media's role in diaspora-home communication could be, for example, in improving openness and transparency of government in the country-of origin as well as informing of services offered in migrants' destination communities. Governments of sending countries can use social media in offering support services and information to migrants in their new communities such as information on language courses or assistance in opening bank accounts without green cards, which makes sending remittances easier. In the context of the Dominican Republic social media could be employed in the work of CONDEX (National Council for Dominican Communities Abroad). CONDEX is supposed to employ a participatory process to coordinate policies, programs, projects and actions that will connect and integrate the Dominican communities abroad to the development of the country. Social media could be used in the participatory process. According to Benítez (2006, 189) cyber communities can reinforce local development projects. This could be done, for instance, so that local development projects combining government development projects, for example, with home town associations' projects and even individual philanthropy can be created and followed via social media. This way the transparency of these projects could be enhanced as migrants could follow the

progress online and have the ability to plan and discuss the project with people back home.

NGOs supporting migrants in their new communities as well as those operating towards supporting the communities back in the old home country can be active in the social media. The channel can offer new working methods and also function as way to recruit new active members and volunteers. Civic activism in social media is increasingly common. There were examples of successful campaigns also in my data, but there is potential for much more; a good way of spreading information these campaigns is via the already existing communities in the social media. One post on *Dominicans* can reach over 20,000 people. Campaigns can be run and people can participate in them from a distance, also towards the country of origin as the Barrick Gold and "Policia no me mate" campaigns showed.

Social media seems to offer a new opening to include second- and third generation migrants into transnational communities. Vertovec (2009, 75-76) argues that while not all transnational practices are maintained over several generations, being socialized in a transnational environment can have a substantial influence on identity. This is extremely important in order to ensure the continued commitment to the old home country. These communities can even act as information channels on cultural and social events, especially in cases where culture from the country of origin is presented in the country of residence as *Dominicanos en Miami y USA* very successfully did.

Above I have presented some suggestions in which the transnational migrant communities in social media networks can be utilized in order to support development processes in both the communities where the migrants currently reside, and perhaps more importantly in their countries and communities of origin which often are located in the development world. Not all countries and communities are equally connected to the internet and the social media, but where ever possible its potential should be observed and the spread of the internet should be encouraged. The new virtual spaces are here to stay and their possibilities also in development should be embraced where possible.

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